

DHAMMA WITHIN REACH

A Buddhist monk with a shaved head, wearing brown robes, stands in a shallow stream. He is holding a yellow bowl in his left arm and a dark bag in his right. The stream flows over dark, wet rocks. The background is a lush forest with large, mossy rocks and dense green foliage. The lighting is soft, suggesting a misty or early morning atmosphere.

A Guide to
Endurance, Patience and Wisdom

Ajahn Nyanamoli Thero

DHAMMA WITHIN REACH

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I delight not in life, I delight not in death.

I await my time like a hireling his wage.

I delight not in life, I delight not in death,

I await my time mindful and aware.

—Thag. 14:1

PREFACE

The following texts are rewritten and expanded essays based on the transcripts from a selection of my video and audio talks and discussions.

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Nyanamoli,
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PREY TO SUFFERING

“Here some person goes forth out of faith from the home life into homelessness, considering: ‘I am a victim of birth, ageing, and death, of sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair; I am a victim of suffering, a prey to suffering. Surely an ending of this whole mass of suffering can be known.’”

—MN 30

Q: How should one deal with emotions?

Nyanamoli: One should not act out of one’s emotions. Instead become aware of them while they’re enduring. (Which is how you don’t act out of them.) But you should also see them as a symptom of an underlying problem and not as the problem itself. When you think that the symptom is the problem, you’re not going to look for what the real problem is. And unless you’re free from suffering and have understood the Four Noble Truths (have become a *sotāpanna*), everything you think is a problem is actually a symptom of the problem. Even when you suffer, that *dukkha* is a symptom of your liability-to-suffering (*Dukkha*). And that’s where the problem is, that’s why you suffer in the first place: because you are *liable* to suffer even when you are not suffering.

Suffering is the symptom of *Dukkha*, which is the problem. Freedom from *Dukkha* then means freedom from the symptoms as well. In other words, freedom from the liability to suffer means freedom from suffering.

“Suffering” is a bit of an unfortunate translation. You could say that because symptoms of *Dukkha* are suffering, *dukkha* is also suffering, of course. But these things are not on the same level. *Dukkha* that needs to be understood is on the level of that “liability”. Something like an ever-present *risk* of suffering. That risk is not on the level of

some particular thing that currently might be bothering you. That's why the Buddha would say: "The wise man would reflect: I am *subject* to suffering. I'm *subject* to misfortune." Meaning: "Nothing has happened to me, but it could. I am *subjected to the possibility* of these bad things happening." I am at risk.

Q: I'm a prey to suffering.

Nm: Exactly. But if people confuse Dukkha to be the suffering that's sometimes felt and sometimes isn't; sometimes avoidable, sometimes not; they will not look for what the real problem of suffering is. They will not seek how to become risk-free.

For example, if you were being hunted by a lion, you'd assume that the problem is only if a lion actually attacks you. You don't recognise that the problem is already, in fact, that the lion *could* possible attack you at any given time. And that would be the main reason for the lion eventually attacking you: you remained within its hunting ground because you didn't recognized the risk of being there even before you were attacked.

So, before the lion attacks you, you should recognise that this is the hunting ground of a lion, and you better do something about it before it attacks you. That's what *Dukkha* is—that liability to an attack.

Literally, *dukkha* means "un-ease", and *sukha* means "ease". So, one can think: "There's nothing wrong with me. I'm not being mauled by lions now. But I recognise that this is the stomping ground of wild cats that hunt people and I am at risk of becoming their prey." Such recognition would make you very uneasy. You can't just hide because you're still within the same hunting ground. You will have to step out from your hiding place eventually and when you do, you will still be inside the lion's domain and it might pounce on you.

That's why it feels easier for people to ignore this anxious recognition of the fundamental uneasiness of their situation. It's easier to cover up the fact that you are a *prey to suffering* of any kind. Usually people deal with suffering only when it arises and they cannot evade it. However, that dealing is not really addressing the core of the problem. It's more on the level of managing the suffering until it disappears. Fighting off a lion. You might succeed few times, but you know for sure that eventually it will get you.

Q: You simply evaded the lions, you managed to survive their attack but still remain in their domain. It's like when people say "My practice is working because I don't suffer as much as I used to..."

Nm: Exactly. One has become very skilled in hiding away from the lions, even occasionally outrunning them. But the only reason that such skills are necessary is because one is still within the lion's grounds. The Buddhist practice is supposed to take you out of the domain of *Dukkha*, out of the lion's domain. You might be skilfully evading a lion, but you're constantly burdened by the duty of needing to do so. One slip, one error, and you're done. And the bottom line is that eventually the lion will get you, and you already know that deep down. That's the message that the "divine messengers" are trying to convey to us: *sickness*, *ageing* and *death*. The three lions that no one can escape or win over. You can't hide from it. In the end, it will hunt you down.

If your practice never makes you realise, "Oh, it's about that liability to suffer, being prey to suffering" as the Buddha would say; you are not uprooting the suffering, you're just managing it. And if the practice of Dhamma doesn't uproot the suffering, then it's not the Dhamma the Buddha was teaching.

The fact that you can go throughout the day without experiencing much lust, anger or discomfort of any kind means little. Is that lack of discomfort due to stepping outside of the domain where you were a prey to these things? Is it because it's impossible for you to suffer? Is it because you're not liable to future loss, aversion, delusion? Or is it simply because circumstances are currently suiting you? At the moment there are no lions in sight. Which one is it? And if you look at it, honestly, you already know the answer. But it's easy to think that: "Well, since I discovered Buddhism, I don't suffer as much." But is that because you understood the nature of that un-ease, that *Dukkha*, that being a prey to suffering of any kind? Is it because you have found the way out of the lions' hunting ground? Or is it because you are a bit more careful what you do or say, practice restraint and live in a protected, spiritual community or safe environment? Which one is it?

Ask yourself, "Am I internally incapable of suffering or am I just surrounded by my external buffer zones?" And again, if you're honest, the answer will be quite simple and obvious. Because if you know that you're free, outside of the lion's domain, or you know how to escape that domain, you would not worry about a specific

lion which might jump on you. Why would you need a safe place, when it's impossible for you to be hurt?

Q: You can investigate and describe all the ways that a lion can catch and maul you, and recognise all the different ways that you can suffer and feel enriched on account of your various psychological insights, but fundamentally, nothing has changed.

Nm: Exactly. It doesn't matter if you know how many ways lions can drag you around and kill you. The point is, you're still liable and subjected to the possibility of one of those ways applying to you. So it's not about studying the ways you can suffer. It's about recognising that you are at the risk of suffering at any given time and then doing something about it.

If you want to understand how to be free from all the things that could bother you, you need to understand the nature of your situation as a human being. So what is the *nature* of you being a prey to a lion? The nature is that you are within the lion's domain. Can a lion get you if you're not within its enclosure? If you're outside of their game reserve, if you abandon it, if you've freed yourself from it, if you broke away? No, it would be impossible for any lion to hunt you down there. So that's then what freedom from suffering means: being there where suffering cannot touch you anymore. Being on the "other shore" as the Buddha would say it.

Q: Then why are you in that game reserve?

Nm: Well, because you don't recognise that you are prey to suffering and because there are things in that game reserve that you refuse to renounce. You don't recognise that you are prey because that scares you, it results in anxiety. Especially when you simultaneously recognize that you don't know how to stop being a prey. And you don't renounce things because pleasure is the only way you know how to escape discomfort of any kind. So by ignoring what the real problem is you inadvertently remain within that problem.

Q: How can you no longer be a prey to the lion?

Nm: By understanding the extent of the lion's domain. By understanding what *Dukkha* is, you will understand what the freedom

from or escape from it is. *Dukkha* is not a particular lion hunting you, the dukkha is already that you are at the present risk of being hunted.

So the truth that you will discover—the Four Noble Truths—would be: “The only reason the lions can hunt me down and will eventually do so, is because I keep myself in *their* game reserve.”

And you keep yourself there because of the many pleasures that you get there. The nice fruits, good company, beautiful views, lovely streams, etc. And the problem is that you put that first, and the danger from the lions second. If you were not to forget that the lions might be watching you at any given time no amount of those joyful pleasures would be enough for you to stay there. But what happens is that most of the time you don’t see the lions. So you forget that you are still a prey to them, even when you don’t see them. Then you get careless and attracted, attached and dependent on all those beautiful sense pleasures which you enjoy there. Forgetting that you’re liable to death, by not thinking about it, you maintain the whole world of sensuality, suffering, anger, despair, etc. But if you were not to forget that you are liable to die at any given second, during an in breath or an out breath, then any passion you would have on account of being alive will have to fade away. It would wither away because you’re not feeding it anymore:

“When a Bhikkhu becomes accustomed to the perception of death, his mind draws back from attachment to life...”

—AN 7:49

THE UPROOTING OF SUFFERING

Q: Ajahn, you have said many times that the problem is that we are affected by things in the first place. When that happens we naturally try to *manage* that arisen suffering, instead of looking for the way of *uprooting* it. So that it cannot affect us in the future.

Nyanamoli: That's the fundamental difference I often try to highlight. The practice of the Dhamma is not supposed to only help you deal with things that bother you, it's supposed to uproot your liability to be bothered *in the first place*. The Dhamma does not manage your suffering, it removes the possibility for you to suffer in the first place. So the goal for your practice is to learn how not to be affected by things to begin with. It's not about having a perfect management system that will always help you deal with the pain *once it has arisen*.

Because that's where the true problem of dukkha is: it has arisen. It doesn't matter if it doesn't last long or if you know how to quickly get rid of it. What matters is that you cannot prevent it from arising and affecting you. And that should be your real concern.

Q: So, management of suffering is not the Dhamma.

Nm: No. It's an approximation of the Dhamma. It's not the "one and only way" which results in purification of "being" (*satipaṭṭhāna*), the way that removes all that is unwholesome.

"Monks, this is the one and only path for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of

the higher knowledge, and for the realization of Nibbāna.”

—MN 10

The Dhamma is that direct, one and only path for uprooting the suffering, not the management of it. Management helps you deal with it when you don't know the escape. The Dhamma is the escape. That knowledge that overcomes the liability to suffering, once and for all, is what the Dhamma is.

Q: A person must then first recognise the fact that they are *subject* to suffering.

Nm: Exactly. The wise man who leaves the household life for the homeless life, does so because he realises that he is *prey* to suffering. He knows that sooner or later he will inevitably have to be touched by suffering. He realizes that the problem is that suffering is *possible*, at any given time, regardless of whether he's suffering right now. He must realise that even if he spends his entire life avoiding major sufferings, the mere *liability* to any suffering is already suffering in itself. And that liability is unavoidable.

The Buddha was neither sick, old nor dying when he saw a sick, old, and a dead person, the “divine messengers”. Yet he knew that he was liable to those things, and he understood that that's where the issue is.

So, although one might currently not be experiencing any form of suffering and unwholesome states, one should not settle for that. Instead, one should look further and think thus: “Although right now I am not experiencing bad and painful mental states, will I also be so in the future? Is it possible for those non-arisen unwholesome things to arise?” If the answer is “yes”, then one should recognize that that is something that can be addressed *right now*, and not tomorrow. That's the crossroads: are you headed in the direction of uprooting, or management. Most people go down the road of management, thinking that they will deal with the problem when it arises later on. While failing to understand that the liability to future unpleasantness is already a problem *right now*.

You don't have to wait for a particular suffering to arise in order to deal with it, because the primordial liability to suffering is *already present* and you are not dealing with that.

It's a very common attitude for practitioners to think that if they

are not lustful or angry most of the time, then they are doing fine. But if you ask yourself if they could arise in the future, and the answer is yes, then you can know all is not well.

The reason why mere management of suffering is not the answer is because management requires suffering to arise first. It needs *dukkha* to be there first in order to manage it. If you keep managing your *dukkha* with the hope that somehow your liability to suffer will disappear by itself, that means your practice revolves around wishful thinking. It means there is no direct insight into the arising of suffering and thus no knowledge of what needs to be understood for the complete freedom from it.

Q: So one should aim for the possibility of *dukkha* to disappear, not just the current suffering that might bother one...

Nm: Exactly. One has to understand where that liability is. What is its present cause. So one needs to aim at understanding the *root* of suffering and not just the way out of this particular suffering that's currently present.

You suffer because you resist the *idea* of discomfort even before the actual discomfort comes your way. You resist the thought of the possibility of discomfort here and now and that is why here and now you experience *dukkha*. It's not because there is something in the world bothering you. You are bothered because you resist the idea of being bothered. That's why the Buddha did not say that things in the world are the cause of *dukkha*; he said that craving (*taṇhā*) in regard to how you feel is the cause of *dukkha*. If you feel good, you habitually *crave for more* of that feeling. If you feel bad, you habitually *crave for less* of that feeling. If you feel neither-bad-nor-good, you habitually *ignore* that feeling.

So the reason for your suffering in the first place is not because the world throws things at you that make you feel unpleasant. The reason is your *attitude* towards whatever you are *currently feeling* due to that world. And you will not see this as the root of suffering for as long as you accept the management of the world as the valid way of freeing yourself from *dukkha*.

Thus, seeing your liability to suffer, even before a particular suffering arises, brings you closer to seeing where your *taṇhā* is.

Q: How then do you not crave against the pain? How do you stop craving for pleasure? How do you remove *taṇhā*?

Nm: By not confusing the management of painful circumstances for the uprooting of craving. By enduring the pain and not acting out of it. By keeping the precepts and seeing the danger in the slightest chance of breaking them. That's how you will gradually stop blaming the world and others for your suffering and instead see your craving as the direct and *only* cause for your *dukkha*.

And you can train this strength of developing self-control out of which wisdom can arise. That's where the work is. In skilfully enduring feelings of pleasure and pain and not acting out of craving for more or less of them. Not trying to manage them so that you can *feel* like "everything is fine". Because it isn't, for as long as your craving remains.

INTENTIONS BEHIND ACTIONS

The Right meditation is determined by the Right view.

“The Blessed One said: Now what, monks, is noble right meditation with its supports & requisite conditions? Any singleness of mind equipped with these seven factors—right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, & right mindfulness—is called noble right meditation with its supports & requisite conditions.

Therein, bhikkhus, right view *comes first*. And how does the right view come first? One understands wrong view as wrong view and right view as right view: this is one’s right view.”

—MN 117

That means that even if a person doesn’t have the Right view, their meditation should be concerned about getting it. And that is done by developing the self-transparency (or self-honesty) concerning skilful/good states of mind (*kusala*) and unskilful/bad ones (*akusala*).

The Buddha defined the Right view in those very terms—knowing “good as good”, and “bad as bad”. The person with the Right view knows for himself, beyond any doubt, *kusala* as *kusala* and *akusala* as *akusala*. By seeing it—he recognizes it. He doesn’t need to hold or adopt any other external criteria. The clarity of his vision pertains to here-and-now, internally. Thus, for someone who hasn’t achieved that yet, that’s where the meditation should start. The obtaining of the right criteria and then meditating through it. Keeping it “composed” is the definition of the Right *samādhi*.

The problem is that this kind of instruction is very non-specific. People today usually need something more relatable. They require meditation “methods” and “techniques”. An average man today wants a “recipe”, a prescription of “steps” for his meditation. He wants to be *told what to do*. He wishes to know what *exactly* he should perform, that would then automatically result in his liberation. Unfortunately, it doesn’t work like that. If we look at the Suttas, whenever the Buddha was talking about meditation it was to bring the fulfilment of knowledge and wisdom. Yet, if a person has none of the latter to begin with, then the fulfilment cannot arise nor be fabricated mechanically. Very often the Buddha’s reply on how to meditate would be in instructing people in recognizing and avoiding the unskilful, and cultivating (*bhāvanā*) the skilful. Discerning the nature of *kusala* and *akusala* has the potential of taking the mind above both. Freeing it from action (*kamma*) and its results (*vipāka*). And that’s exactly why performing (*doing* or *acting*) the specific steps cannot take one *beyond* the nature of *kamma*. Understanding it, however, might.

On a more practical level, methods and techniques are inadequate because usually they don’t amount to more than *management* of the problem of suffering. Management of a problem is not the same as *uprooting* it. That’s why a person will be better off trying to discern what kind of attitude towards meditation can be sustained throughout the day that would eventually uproot or *prevent* one from being able to suffer *in the first place*. An attitude that wouldn’t need any particular favourable environment or special conditions to be applied. Regardless of whether one is sitting in a full lotus posture, or just walking down the street. One needs to find that kind of *composure* that one can maintain in different circumstances. The way to do this is by establishing the *general mindfulness*. Not the particular observation and adherence to the prescribed steps of a “meditation” technique, that results in one being absorbed in it. But the opposite: awareness of one’s general situation as a whole (e.g. an enduring mood, state of mind, persisting feeling etc.). Common practice of “absorption” can then be seen as the complete opposite of this type of general mindfulness.

Every *jhāna*, for example, is fully founded upon the basis of the

unshakeable mindfulness as a number of Suttas often mention. So, even if a person wants to do his meditation in a “formal” manner, such as sit for an hour a few times a day, that is fine. As long as it is not done for the purpose of developing some sort of “experience of absorption” out of it. Like trying to watch one’s breath hoping for some novelty energy release or pleasures. The point of meditation is to remain *aware* as much as possible. Aware or mindful of *whatever* is already there *enduring* (feeling, perception, intentions). Not interfere with it, or deny it, or try to replace it. Just discerning the enduring presence of the arisen experience. Emotionally, perceptually and intentionally. That kind of composure can then be “spread out” over one’s entire day, even when a person is not sitting down to meditate. (Which is what the Buddha said for *jhāna* too—one can sit, walk, eat, go to toilet, etc., while in *jhāna*. Very contrary to the popular belief.)

And this should not be too hard to grasp (though that doesn’t mean it will be easy to accept). The whole point of the practice of Dhamma and meditation is nothing other than understanding the nature of things. The understanding that arises on account of the mindful discerning of whatever is *arisen* and *enduring* in our experience. And it’s that understanding of the unskilful that frees the mind from it. If a person wants to be truly free once and for all, the only way to do so is through knowledge and mindfulness.

Thus, if one wants to practice in a manner that pertains to this final goal of freedom, one needs to become very mindful and honest about the intentions behind any actions. Simple actions, more complex ones, careless or important, big or small—actions of any kind done by body, speech or mind. One will need to attend to them mindfully until the motivations and intentions behind them are fully seen. That is because it is the intention that defines skilful action as skilful and unskilful as unskilful. It defines the “reason” for one’s action, so to speak. That’s where the skilfulness of an action is rooted in. That’s also the *real* reason, the one deep inside that one might not be willing to admit to oneself. If a person is able to reach the full transparency of one’s intentional actions and its roots, that person is a step closer in discerning what makes *kusala*, *kusala* and *akusala*, *akusala*. That person is a step closer to the beginning

of the Right view.

So, if one wishes to meditate, one needs to be concerned with one's actions and choices. (Which is also why *silā* or virtue comes before the Dhamma.) In such manner any motivation for one's intentions behind doing this or that will be revealed and not taken at its face value. Through this persistent self-questioning one can also see whether an action that is about to be, is rooted in an unskilful motive. Like sensuality, ill will, vanity or distraction for example.

What's important is that one would need to abandon only that: *the unskilful*. One doesn't need to cancel the entire arisen experience and behaviour. That would be a form of overdoing it, and not using mindfulness as a criterion of discernment. "Is what I am about to do rooted in greed? Lust? How about ill will and annoyance or anger?" Or "am I acting out of a desire for distraction and forgetfulness? Am I willingly giving in to acts and desires that would delude me further and mask the unskilful basis of those very actions?" Such questioning about the personal and inner dimension of one's daily experiences and actions will *have to* result in being mindful. This is a definition of (proper) *vipassanā*, or investigation, since that's exactly what's being done. Self investigating the motivation behind any actions. And it is obvious to see how this kind of attitude and mindful practice would result in discerning "good as good, bad as bad". How it would not be dependent on any external authority or belief. Instead it would be a direct, visible, universal criterion seen personally for oneself.

It's important to note it is not necessary that one becomes neurotic or obsessed (though it might happen) about it. Always having to *actually* ask oneself "What am I doing?" before every action. What's important is the *attitude* of such questioning. The "answer" is already implied within it. One already *knows* why one is acting. (Whether one is aware of it or not, that's a different matter.) Of course, until that attitude is developed and refined, a person will have to endure the possible loss of (superficial) confidence and go through choice paralysis. That's because the implications of one's smallest actions are becoming more revealed. A person starts to feel responsible even for things that are not in his control.

So, through this kind of “revealing” of the roots of one’s actions, one is simultaneously becoming less and less able to ignore one’s true intentions. One will not be able to turn a blind eye towards acting good while the real motivation underneath it isn’t necessarily so. That’s why this attitude is “self-transparent”. Whatever is on the surface, one simultaneously sees *beneath it* as well.

It should be clear by now that self-honesty or transparency is not an optional thing (or just one of different ways leading to the same goal). It’s an absolute pre-requisite for any chance of getting the Right view and knowing how to practice the Dhamma. If a person still has difficulties in abandoning his own dependence upon a particular “method” of practice, he can still take up this practice of self-questioning all the time, as a “method”. Although not ideal, it will still result in seeing through the motivation and emotional need for any methods in the first place. (Needing “something to do”.) By seeing the subtle motivation under *any* action, one will automatically feel responsible for one’s choices. No matter how “justified” those might seem externally. The weight on it is always on oneself, and that’s something that one cannot ignore any further.

It is also then when the full weight of the Buddha’s “beings are owners of their actions” saying is truly felt:

“I am the owner of my actions, heir to actions, born of actions, related to my actions, and I have actions as my shelter. Whatever I do, for good or for evil, to that will I become the heir.”

—AN 5:57

THE RIGHT ENDURANCE

“Patient endurance is the ultimate austerity.

Nibbana is the ultimate, say the Buddhas. . .”

—Dhp. 184

Q: What is the middle way between asceticism and sensual indulgence? Is it the practice of enduring (neither giving in to or denying) thoughts?

Nyanamoli: That’s the way to cultivate the middle way. Acting out of sensual thoughts, accepting them without reflection, not enduring them with sense restraint—that is what Sensuality is.

“Thought and lust are a man’s sensuality, not the various things in the world;

Thought and lust are a man’s sensuality, the various things just stand there in the world;

But the wise get rid of desire therein.”

—AN 6:63

Once you realize that acting out of sensual thoughts is bad, you will probably naturally jump to the conclusion that you mustn’t have those thoughts to begin with. That you must get rid of them and prevent them from manifesting. That is how you go to the *other* extreme: *denial of thoughts*.

You need to differentiate between “withstanding arisen thoughts” (enduring) and trying to “get rid of the presence of arisen thoughts” (denying).

The latter way is equally ignoble to the habitual giving in to sensual thoughts. That way can take you into that other extreme of self-mortification and extreme denials.

Physical endurance is hard, but it's not as hard as enduring a presence of a sensual thought without acting out of it or trying to deny its presence.

Physical endurance is hard, but it's not as hard as enduring mental states like anxiety, betrayal, irritation, without acting out of them or trying to deny their presence.

When the Buddha spoke about "getting rid" of the sensual thoughts, he explained how that is done: by not welcoming, not delighting, enduring them and not acting out. That's how those thoughts go away. Leave you alone, so to speak. Thus, you have "got rid" of them.

It's important for people to recognize that *acceptance* or *denial* of one's states of mind is where the problem is. Not in the states of mind arising in themselves. And when the Suttas talk about the two ignoble ways of "sensual indulgence" and "self mortification", this is where those ways are rooted. The casual practitioner nowadays might be too quick to dismiss these two "extremes" by believing they are these coarse forms of misconduct and self-torture. But they are not. Sure, they can be, but they are rooted at a much more subtle level. The level of simply saying "yes" to the joy of one's desire, or trying to deny the appearance of it. It's crucial to regard it as subtle as this, because only then the true subtlety of the Middle Way can become apparent. (Middle Way that is also quickly conflated and misconceived as a mere practice of *moderation* in regard to everything, including sensuality).

Enduring patiently allows for wisdom. The Right discernment begins by allowing thoughts to *endure* without welcoming, denying or ignoring them. *Thoughts manifest on their own*. That's the fundamental point. Thinking that you *can* deny them already implies a wrong view, whereby you think that you are in charge of those

thoughts, or that you are responsible for their arising. What you are responsible for is your *acceptance* of them. You are responsible for delighting and acting out of them.

If you manage to allow them to endure, and not act out of the pressure these thoughts put on you, you will then naturally try to get rid of them. Why? Because allowing them to endure, without acting out, is very unpleasant. That's why "self-mortification" is a natural response by one who has tried to endure sensuality: doubling down and trying to take control of that unpleasantness by intentionally increasing it.

It is easier to either act towards sensuality or deny it. Patiently enduring it, without acting out or denying it, is the hardest thing of all. The Middle Way is the hardest thing of all. It's much easier to get angry or lustful at things, and just to say yes or no, act and express yourself quickly. Rather than to deal with the pressurizing thought and enduring it for as long as it wants to be there.

If you want to deal with the pain of an enduring thought, when you are not acting out of it, you need to allow it to endure so that you can understand it. The problem is not that unwholesome thoughts are manifesting. The problem is in that you cannot endure their presence. It pressures you. So you go either towards or against them. Either way, you are affirming the grip that such thoughts have over you. You are feeding it.

Allowing thoughts to endure without acting out of them, would be the beginning of the Middle Way. That's exactly what "grasping the sign of the mind" (*cittanimitta*) means in the Suttas. Grasping the signs of the endurance of your mind. Signs that are usually covered up by habitual acting out or denying it, by either over-doing or under-doing the restraint.

"So too, Soṇa, if effort is aroused too forcefully this leads to restlessness, and if effort is too lax this leads to laziness. Therefore, Soṇa, resolve on a balance of effort, achieve a natural state of the faculties, and pick up the sign there."

—AN 6:55

Q: When you are watching the breath and a lustful thought arises, some tend to think ‘I must get rid of this’ therefore I must just watch my breath so that I don’t have lustful thoughts, and if I can keep watching my breath I will never have lustful thoughts again.

Nm: That’s like the simile of the deer herd that ran on top of the mountain (MN 25). They are not experiencing any temptation from the bait, for some time, but they are not growing wisdom concerning overcoming the bait either. That means that when their food on the mountain runs out they will go straight back and eat the bait that the hunter laid for them. A person cannot sustain watching their breath 24/7, something will have to come up, one way or another. And when it does, their temporarily generated calmness fades away. There will be no wisdom remaining as to how never to engage with the bait ever again. And the wisdom won’t be there because there was never a direct effort made to develop it. Watching the breath so that pressuring thoughts will go away is identical to running to the top of the mountain where you will hide from the pressure of the bait. Either way, you are ignoring the problem.

Just to be clear: there is no problem if you are watching your breath for reasons other than to ignore or deny the unwholesome thoughts. The problem is when people choose to attend to the breath with the intention of denying the thought. Because the thought is unpleasant, and they do not want to endure it in full awareness. Like in the Suttas when *Mara* comes and tries to tempt the Buddha. The Buddha can’t chase him away, but he can not provide *Mara* with a basis on which to latch, and that’s when *Mara* leaves him alone.

“Once upon a time, mendicants, a tortoise was grazing along the bank of a river in the afternoon. At the same time, a jackal was also hunting along the river bank. The tortoise saw the jackal off in the distance hunting, so it drew its limbs and neck inside its shell, and passed the time in non-activity and silence. But the jackal also saw the tortoise off in the distance grazing. So it went up to the tortoise, and waiting nearby, thinking, ‘When that tortoise sticks one or other of its limbs or neck out from

its shell, I'll grab it right there, rip it out, and eat it!' But when that tortoise didn't stick one or other of its limbs or neck out from its shell, the jackal left disappointed, since it couldn't find a vulnerability. In the same way, Māra the Wicked is always waiting nearby, thinking: 'Hopefully I can find a vulnerability in the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, or mind.' That's why you should live with sense doors guarded..."

—SN 35:240

Thoughts of sensuality arise like flies buzzing around you but unless you provide something suitable for them to land on, they will just buzz off elsewhere. And just like when the Suttas describe how to not pay attention to unwholesome thoughts:

"If evil, unskilful thoughts—connected with desire, aversion or delusion—still arise in the monk while he is scrutinizing the drawbacks of those thoughts, he should pay no attention to those thoughts. As he is paying no attention to them, those evil, unskilful thoughts are abandoned and subside..."

—MN 20

This should not be confused with denying the presence of thoughts. It's quite obvious: it's because they are present on their own, that you have an option to not give them your attention. I wouldn't have to 'not give you my attention' if you are not here. So if I am instructed to not give you my attention, that means I need to *know* that you are here first. Then for the duration of, or endurance of your presence here, I will not give you my attention.

Q: Is it about being equanimous regarding a lustful mind state?

Nm: Equanimity would be the outcome of this correct way of enduring. Eventually, *Mara* will indeed leave you alone. The pressure will not be able to overwhelm your mind if you maintain sense restraint. The restraint will equip you with the ability to endure the thoughts correctly. And the longer you do it, the stronger you will

become. The clearer the Middle Way will be.

Q: Those mental states will be less intense.

Nm: Yes, but that’s more of a side effect. Your concern should be that ‘you are not moved by those states even if they intensely last forever’. Your concern should not be “how I make this less intense”, since that would amount to denying its presence again. As the Buddha said:

“Rāhula, cultivate a meditation that is in tune with the earth; for when you cultivate a meditation that is in tune with the earth (water, fire, air, space) arisen agreeable and disagreeable contacts will not invade your mind and remain. Just as people throw clean things and dirty things, excrement, urine, spittle, pus, and blood on the earth, and the earth is not repelled, humiliated, and disgusted because of that... ”

–MN 62

So it’s important to remember this. You cannot decide or hope for an end date to your endurance, after which you can go back to the world. The attitude and your *willingness* to endure must be *infinite*. For as long as you live you shall not give in. That’s the correct way to develop patience that can eventually lead to complete freedom from suffering.

“Bhikkhus, ...I strove tirelessly, determined: ‘Willingly, let only my skin, sinews, and bones remain, and let the flesh and blood dry up in my body, but I will not relax my energy so long as I have not attained what can be attained by manly strength, energy, and exertion.’ It was by such heedfulness that I achieved liberation, bhikkhus; it was by such heedfulness that I achieved the unsurpassed security from bondage...”

–AN 2:12

Only then can you reap the benefits of the Middle Way that the

Buddha taught. Only then can you say that you are truly and completely free.

Q: What to do when you have a peaceful state of mind?

Nm: You do the same. Don't be negligent, or distract yourself from it. If it's peaceful, then question it also: "Did I create that peace? Did I have a direct say in its manifestation? No. I am actually subjected to it. It's agreeable, but let me not delight in that agreeability of mind and become careless. It's peaceful, but let me be equally aware of it. Thus, when it changes I shall not be affected by it."

The goal is to eventually not be affected by any state of mind.

ADDICTION TO SENSUALITY

Q: You mentioned before that a person cannot get the Right view without first abandoning the value of sensuality. What did you mean by that?

Nyanamoli: One must understand that abstaining from sensual acts does not automatically mean one is abandoning sensuality. A person might be perfectly celibate and restrained, but internally he still might be *valuing* the pleasures of the senses. He still might not be seeing them as bad, unwholesome and very dangerous. For as long as that is the case, he lacks the necessary basis for the Right view to arise. No matter how physically restrained he is.

Q: So what is felt to be the value in sensuality?

Nm: It's the gratuitous dependence on experiencing the pleasure of the senses. It's the value of safety, comfort, contentment, that for an untrained mind is rooted in the pleasures of satisfying one's sensual cravings. When you can satisfy your desires you feel safe. Desires towards sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touches. It's the value of peace that a drug addict would get after taking drugs.

If you wish to free yourself from that dependence, then you will have to be willing to accept, in a universal manner, that for the rest of your life the safety, peace and joy that you get on account of sense pleasures is dangerous and not worth depending on. You need to see that safety based upon one's senses is not actually safe.

This is important, then if you at least succeed in learning how to

see sensuality in that universally negative manner, if your sense restraint fails and gives in, you will not be as careless as before. You will feel guilt and remorse. You will start to see giving in to sense desires to be a weakness. You will start to realize that you are an addict.

The only reason you're not seeing sense desires as a problem of addiction is because you are refusing to give them up. All you need to do is say "no" to sensual cravings that manifest in your day-to-day life and then very quickly you will feel how deeply addicted you are. You're never going to see how addicted to cigarettes, alcohol or heroin you are until you try to quit. That's when you will feel the weight of it. So the necessary step for giving up an addiction is to stop giving in to it even while you still want to. By restraining yourself physically, your dependence will become more apparent. Then you will have to be willing to accept and endure the inevitable pains of withdrawal. For as long as it takes.

You have to understand why you are addicted to sensuality. It's not because of the nature of the human body, or "hormones" or something. No. It's because you are finding gratification and safety in the satisfaction of your desires. It's because not satisfying your desires and enduring their pressure makes you feel unpleasant and unsafe. It's because not satisfying your desires hurts. That's all.

So, in other words, the value of sensuality is that it provides you with pleasure from the pain of itself. Sensuality touches you with pain, but at the same time, it offers you a solution for that same pain. It's just like racketeering: "Okay, if you pay me, I'll make your problems go away, problems that I put on you so that you will pay me". So you get extorted by your own sensuality, your own desires. Sensual desires hurt, and giving in to them will remove that hurt and reward you with more pleasure. It's a win-win. Or so it seems, until you realize that the true win is to not be pressured by the desires in the first place. The win is not having to pay the racketeering thugs for your safety; the win is to not have the thugs pressure you at all.

And the more you give in to the pressure of sensuality, the more

you will have to give in since its nature can never be changed. The Nature of sensuality is that it *hurts*, *burns*, and *pressures* you.

“I see other beings who are not devoid of passion for sensualities, who are chewed up by sensual craving, burning with sensual fever, partaking of sensualities...

Magandiya, suppose that there was a leper covered with sores and infections, devoured by worms, picking the scabs off the openings of his wounds with his nails, cauterizing his body over a pit of glowing embers. His friends, companions, and relatives would take him to a doctor. The doctor would concoct medicine for him, and thanks to the medicine he would be cured of his leprosy: well and happy, free, master of himself, going wherever he liked. Then suppose two strong men, having grabbed him with their arms, were to drag him to a pit of glowing embers. What do you think? Wouldn't he twist his body this way and that?

—“Yes, Master Gotama. Why is that? The fire is painful to the touch, very hot & scorching.”

—“Now what do you think, Magandiya? Is the fire painful to the touch, very hot & scorching, only now, or was it also that way before?”

—“Both now & before is it painful to the touch, very hot & scorching, master Gotama. It's just that when the man was a leper covered with sores and infections, devoured by worms, picking the scabs off the openings of his wounds with his nails, his faculties were impaired, which was why, even though the fire was painful to the touch, he had the skewed perception of 'pleasant'.”

—“In the same way, Magandiya, sensual pleasures in the past were painful to the touch, very hot & scorching; sensual pleasures in the future will be painful to the touch, very hot & scorching; sensual pleasures at present are painful to the touch, very hot & scorching; but when beings are not free from the passion for sensual pleasures—devoured by sensual craving, burning with sensual fever— their faculties are impaired, which is why, even though sensual pleasures are painful to the touch, they have the skewed perception of 'pleasant'.” —MN 75

Furthermore, the reason why addictions in general are hard to give up is because you're not just giving them up. You're actually giving up the *entire world* that you lived *through them*. Hence, even the idea of sense restraint and saying "no" to one's desires almost immediately results in fear. Whether it's alcohol, cigarettes or drugs doesn't matter. The reason they're pleasant is because you get to experience the whole world on the basis of that substance or that pleasure. Heroin is not pleasant in itself, but experiencing the world through heroin is where that addictive pleasure comes from.

Everybody wants peace. Everybody wants non-disturbance. And sensual pleasures offer you that peace. They tempt you with a perfect satisfaction and freedom from disturbance... disturbance that they put on you.

That's why withdrawal from sense pleasures, in general, has to be painful at first. You are withdrawing from the only peace and safety you know. That's why, more often than not, such withdrawal will feel like dying.

And all of this is even more true if you try to abandon sexual desires, which are far more deeply rooted than any substance you can be addicted to. You will need to have a pretty strong determination in order to abandon it. Such determination can be found and developed by contemplating the danger that is hidden in every sensual desire, regardless of how small or insignificant it might appear. Allowing yourself to feel the peril of it that is universally present in every sensual desire. Even if you don't want to practice the Dhamma for full awakening. Sensuality is always unwholesome, because sensuality is *always dangerous*. That's what the Buddha advised to everyone who wanted to practice his teaching. He said that whatever action or practice leads to dispassion, disenchantment, abandoning, renunciation, a person should value it and do it. That action is good. Whatever action leads to passion, attachment, indulgence, a person should abandon it. That action is bad.

"Gotami, the qualities of which you may know, 'These qualities lead to passion, not to dispassion; to being fettered, not to being unfettered; to accumulating, not to

relinquishing; to self-aggrandizement, not to modesty; to discontent, not to contentment; to entanglement, not to seclusion; to laziness, not to aroused persistence; to being burdensome, not to being unburdensome': You may categorically hold, 'This is not the Dhamma, this is not the Vinaya, this is not the Teacher's instruction.'

As for the qualities of which you may know, 'These qualities lead to dispassion, not to passion; to being unfettered, not to being fettered; to shedding, not to accumulating; to modesty, not to self-aggrandizement; to contentment, not to discontent; to seclusion, not to entanglement; to aroused persistence, not to laziness; to being unburdensome, not to being burdensome': You may categorically hold, 'This is the Dhamma, this is the Vinaya, this is the Teacher's instruction.'"

—AN 8:53

So, ask yourself, which practice leads to dispassion? Practice of celibacy or non-celibacy? Sense restraint or non-sense restraint? Behaviour of addiction or non-addiction? Well, the answer is pretty straightforward.

NO NEED TO SAY NO TO *EVERYTHING*

“Bhikkhus, these two extremes ought not to be cultivated by one gone forth from the house-life. What are the two? There is devotion to pursuit of pleasure in the objects of sensual desire, which is inferior, low, vulgar, ignoble, and leads to no good; and there is devotion to self-torment, which is painful, ignoble and leads to no good.

The Middle Way discovered by a Perfect One avoids both these extremes; it gives vision, it gives knowledge, and it leads to peace, to direct acquaintance, to discovery, to *nibbāna*. And what is that Middle Way? It is simply the noble eightfold path, that is to say, right view, right intention; right speech, right action, right livelihood; right effort, right mindfulness, right composure. That is the middle way discovered by a Perfect One, which gives vision, which gives knowledge, and which leads to peace, to direct acquaintance, to discovery, to *nibbāna*.” –SN 56:11

Nyanamoli: It’s a good time now to ask yourself what needs to be restrained. Do you say “no” to everything? To whatever your eye wants to see or whatever your nose wants to smell? Or are there things that you don’t have to refuse.

Q: Depends on my motivations.

Nm: Correct. So what would be the motivation for restraint?

Q: Wanting pleasure and not wanting pain.

Nm: Well, you always want pleasure, you always don't want pain. That's the inevitable starting point. Whatever you do, it's done for the sake of pleasure. However, not every pleasure is *sense based*. Not every joy is sensual. That's what you want to discern. What are the types of pleasures that are not dependent on my senses? And that's why the sole purpose of sense restraint is to reveal your motivation behind your need for pleasure. Are you motivated by the sense pleasure at the time, or are you motivated by the restraint of the sense pleasure, so you get a more wholesome pleasure of peace and non-disturbance later?

You can see here that even the practice of sense restraint and keeping the precepts is rooted in the simple wanting of pleasure. That's what the Buddha meant when he said:

“This body comes into being through craving. And yet it is by relying on craving that craving is to be abandoned. This body comes into being through conceit. And yet it is by relying on conceit that conceit is to be abandoned.”
—AN 4:159

Thus, it is fine to crave for the freedom from craving. That craving has as its aim the extinguishing of craving. The extinguishing of itself. So, although it's still the craving, the motivation behind that craving is different to the craving for sense pleasures for example. Sensual craving has more of sensual craving as its aim, as its motivation. The increase of itself.

Lust, aversion, and distraction (*lobha, dosa, moha*) are not the things that you crave for. They are your motivations for craving things that you crave for. And that's the verse from the Suttas:

“Thought and lust are a man's sensuality, not the various things in the world;

Thought and lust are a man's sensuality, the various things just stand there in the world;

But the wise get rid of desire therein.” —AN 3:63

If you want to uproot lust, aversion and delusion, or at least diminish them, you have to be aware of your intentions and motivations behind your every action. Action by body, by speech, and by the mind. You need to question it, be honest with yourself and then not do it if you know it is unwholesome. But for this practice to bear fruit you need to first restrain your:

Habitual actions *towards* the beautiful/wanted—*lobha*;
 Habitual action *away from* the ugly/unwanted—*dosa*;
 Habitual action from *distracting* yourself from neither ugly nor beautiful—*moha*.

So, for example, you take on the precepts first. Then within that, you practice the sense restraint too. Then you might develop a view that “I will not do anything because everything is rooted in desire”. You will need to see that that very view and decision too is *already* rooted in desire. If you say, “I will stop thinking,” that is already your thought. So such view is a contradiction in terms. That’s why you can’t just decide to stop the problem. You are *made up of the problem*; your *existence* is the problem.

Lets assume you keep the eight precepts strictly. Then you have a thought: “I want to go for a walk.” Ask yourself why you want to go for a walk. “Oh, because I’m restless”. Then it’s clear: your motivation is restlessness. That’s not wholesome. Don’t do it.

Perhaps it’s because you want to experience sights, sounds, smells that will please you and distract your mind from itself. That’s unwholesome. Don’t do it.

Perhaps it’s because your body aches from too much sitting, mind is getting dull and sleepy and you want to break away from the indolence. Then by all means. Go and climb the top of the mountain if it will help you practice mindfulness.

So you need to maintain perspective regarding your *intent*. Going for a walk is itself neither unwholesome nor wholesome. It is neither sensual nor not. It is your intent behind such an action that determines whether you should or shouldn’t do it. This of course applies only to actions that are pretty neutral in themselves. Cer-

tain other actions, such as anything that would be against the five or eight precepts, are always rooted in unwholesome and wrong intent. Such actions can never be done for the right motivation: killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, consuming intoxicants.

See, you don't need to say no to everything. Just those things that are against the precepts and a few other things if they are rooted in your unwholesome intent behind them. Practically speaking, in the beginning you will probably need to say "no" to more than you should, but that's just to be on a safer side. Until you get the correct footing and understand the principle. That's why the Buddha would always lean on the side of asceticism, even if in itself it does not necessarily result in wisdom.

"...Now, monks, suppose that I had eaten, refused more food, had my fill, finished, had enough, had what I needed, and some alms food was left over to be thrown away. Then two monks arrived hungry and weak, and I told them: 'Monks, I have eaten and have had all I needed, but there is this alms-food of mine left over to be thrown away. Eat it if you like; if you do not eat it then I shall throw it away where there is no greenery, or drop it into the water where there is no life.' Then one monk thought: 'the Blessed One has eaten and had what he needed, but there is this alms-food of the Blessed One left over to be thrown away; if we do not eat it the Blessed One will throw it away, but this has been said by the Blessed One: 'Monks, be my heirs in Dhamma, not my heirs in material things.' Now this alms-food is one of the material things. Suppose that instead of eating this alms-food I pass the night and day hungry and weak.'

And instead of eating that alms-food, he passed that night and day hungry and weak. Then the second monk thought: 'the Blessed One has eaten and he has had all that he required, but there is this alms-food of the Blessed One left over to be thrown away. Suppose that I eat this alms-food and pass the night and day neither hungry nor weak.' And after eating that alms-food he passed the night and day neither hungry nor weak. Now although that monk by eating that alms-food passed the night and

day neither hungry nor weak, yet the first monk is more to be respected and commended by me. Why, because the willpower that he has demonstrated shall contribute to the fewness of his wishes, contentment, effacement, easy support, and arousal of energy. Therefore, monks, be my heirs in Dhamma, not my heirs in material things.”

—MN 3

Thus, keep the precepts. Steer on the safer side if unsure. But at the same time don't allow yourself to become neurotic and start blindly saying “no” to everything without making the effort to discern your motivation behind it. You'll will not only lose the Right context but also prevent yourself from developing the understanding that otherwise you were capable of.

CONTEMPLATION OF ANGER

Right contemplation is learning how to think without greed, hatred and delusion underlying your thoughts.

Try and contemplate the phenomenon of anger, the phenomenon of ill will. You don't have to be angry when you want to do this meditation—just bring it to mind, remember when you were angry. You can ask yourself, “What is common to all of those experiences of anger or irritation? What is their nature?” You can answer these questions in many ways, and it's not always crucial to answer them in the same way, because your investigation will lead you to different aspects of that phenomenon. But just keep pressing with the questions while the phenomenon is enduring.

One of the most obvious things is that anger is *unpleasant*. Every single time you experience it, it's unpleasant. Then you can ask a second question: “Can I be angry without that little sting of displeasure in it? Is there any anger that is truly enjoyable and pleasant?” There might be a secondary experience of pleasure through getting back at someone who upset you, but that's not what we're talking about. We're talking about the very first, originally enduring, phenomenon of anger. Is that pleasant or unpleasant? It's always unpleasant, there's not a single exception. It always burns.

Let's put it like this: somebody does something that upsets you, that irritates you. You're irritated, you got angry because you're upset for whatever reason. Then, say, on some other occasion, you're

in a good mood and somebody does the same thing to you but now you really did not experience that sting of discomfort and you're not angry. You might even laugh it off. You realize then that anger is not directly determined by what has been done to you—it's really determined by whether you're experiencing discomfort on account of it or not. It's determined by your *state of mind*.

Every time you were angry, irritated, annoyed, means to some degree you were upset. It doesn't matter how subtle that upset was, it's still the upset which means there was a degree of discomfort, displeasure, unpleasant feeling—every single time. And every single time that you get upset in the future, that will be the same basis. Then you realize what you get angry with in the present, what you've been getting angry with in the past, or what you will be getting angry with in the future, is your being *liable to feel discomfort* on the emotional level. Experiencing unpleasant feelings is what makes you angry. Not other people or objects.

Don't now try to jump and look into an immediate solution—how do I stop doing this?—because it's not on the level of simply stopping it. It's subtler than that. You stop doing it by understanding it and no longer ignoring the nature of anger. You actively make the effort, to think it concretely, properly in the present moment; not to ignore, justify, or provide a random set of emotionally satisfying answers to it. By learning how to endure the emotional discomfort of any kind is how you uproot your actions of anger.

By dwelling on the nature of anger and clarifying it further, you're undoing all the layers of ignoring that you developed through blindly acting out of it all this time. So you have to restrain yourself first—when you're angry, don't give in to anger and then you can correctly reflect on its nature.

Whenever there is anger, it is rooted in discomfort. What is common to every single discomfort? What kind of mental attitude is always in the background?

It's not wanted. That's the attitude. It is resisted. You don't want it to be there. You feel entitled to not having it there. That's

why when people get upset they aim and blame the circumstances that were upsetting. But in reality those are irrelevant. It's the discomfort that is felt, that's where the problem always is. So even when people aim at changing the circumstances, they do so only to remove the displeasure that's within them. But this can never remove your liability to future displeasure touching you and you getting angry. This can only manage the symptoms of anger, but never uproot it.

On the other hand, try not resisting the displeasure. Enduring the circumstances. Be mindful and restrain yourself from giving in to the attitude of "I don't want this".

So, you're sitting quietly and contemplating like this, but then when you go back to the world, the discomfort will inevitably touch you, sooner or later. Then you should try to remember what you've been discerning: "What if I stop resisting this? *This emotional discomfort*, not the circumstances. I will be restrained in regard to the circumstances, but now I know they were never the problem. The problem is that that discomfort touches me and automatically, upon being touched, I simultaneously don't want it. I coil away from it. Why is that? Why do I maintain the view that I'm in a position to prevent feelings from manifesting in me?"

Unpleasant feelings arise on their own. If we were to have control over what feeling arises in us, we would never experience displeasure of any kind. Since we do, it means the domain of feelings is not something we can control. It's something we are *subjected to*.

But why is that a problem? Because you don't want it? But why don't you want it? Because it's a problem. Thus, you create your own vicious circle of not wanting discomfort that is only a problem because you don't want it.

So, would you be able to maintain the attitude of trying to get rid of displeasure if you're not holding on to a view that you can get rid of that displeasure? If you completely realized that the domain of feeling is inaccessible to you, would you still be acting as if you have access to it? As if you can control it?

As we just clarified and discovered, you wouldn't be trying to get rid of the unpleasant feeling unless there is an implicit assumption that you *can* get rid of it. But when you look at the unpleasant feeling, you realize it has arisen on its own, fully formed, independent of you, and you've no say in it. You endure it when it's there. You are free from it when it goes. All you can do is secondarily complain about it, try to get rid of it, prevent it, or affect the circumstances that have indirectly propped it up. So, why do you then still hold on to the attitude of not wanting it, of trying to get rid of it, craving for it not to be, when it's obvious you have no say in it?

It's because of your other underlying attitude that is even more fundamental than the attitude of craving for getting rid of the unpleasant feeling—and that attitude is the attitude of ignorance, the attitude of ignoring the nature of the feeling, pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. That's why ignorance is the most fundamental existential error for which every single being is responsible.

Not contemplating that Nature long enough—that's how you maintain the fully gratuitous attitude of resisting or indulging feelings, depending on whether they were unpleasant or pleasant. Any attitude toward feelings implies, as we said, the assumption that you can control those feelings, either through prolonging them or getting rid of them. But you realize that, whether you're trying to prolong them or get rid of them, that is secondary to the presently enduring feeling that has arisen on its own and that you are subjected to. If you stop ignoring that, these wrong attitudes will have to eventually fade.

That's why ignorance cannot be undone accidentally. You cannot accidentally stumble upon the answer to the universe that will solve and prevent you from suffering ever again, because it's not a mistake, it's an attitude that you maintain through your actions.

Avijjā is the cause of more *avijjā*, ignoring is the reason that you are ignorant. Ignoring the most fundamental, present, right in-your-face, nature of the day-to-day feelings.

You can stop resisting unpleasant feeling, for example, not by deciding to not resist the unpleasant feeling, but by fully overriding it with the understanding that, whether you resist or not makes no difference. Resistance is futile. That's how resisting fades. Ceasing to ignore the obvious futility of your resistance to your present emotional states is how you stop resisting them.

Imagine you're trying to break through a door. You will keep trying for as long as there is hope that you can do it. But then suddenly you hear the possibility that maybe there's no need to be breaking through this door—there's no need to get rid of it. And then you understand that, truly, there is no need; and not just that, you understand that you can't break through even if you wanted to. There's no door, actually—it's a fully cemented, concrete metal block, painted as a door inviting you to come and break it.

That's basically what feelings are. A trap. They present themselves as if they're for you, which is why you naturally assume the ownership and control over them. But that's wrong. They are not *for you*, you are *for them*. You are the one who is subjected to them and has to endure them. Feelings deceive you into a gratuitous sense of ownership. Hence the psychological dependence people have on feeling good and avoiding feeling bad. It helps them maintain the illusion of ownership. If things were solely unpleasant and hurtful it would be easier to give them up. You wouldn't want to own them, would you?

So, feelings present themselves as if they're controllable, and that's why you just fall into that trap of trying to control them, which is why you suffer. As the Buddha himself said, you don't suffer because there is displeasure present, or because misfortune happens to you, and so on—you suffer because there is craving in regard to that unpleasant feeling. Thus, *presence of craving* means *presence of suffering*. Absence of it means there is no suffering present either, regardless of what feeling chooses to arise on its own

What one usually does when there is an unpleasant feeling is to make effort towards chasing an experience that will replace the pain with the pleasant feeling. But that's a separate experience now—

you haven't dealt with the original unpleasant feeling. You just covered it up. It ceased on its own and now you're experiencing some other pleasure on account of your desperate actions of chasing it. But even that feeling of that pleasure has arisen on its own. In other words, it's not a guarantee that the actions towards the world will always result in the same type of feeling, and that's enough to then reveal the nature of its independence. That's why the Buddha said the *puthujjana* doesn't know any other escape from the arisen unpleasant feeling except sensuality, as in replacing it with another experience of pleasant feeling, on account of his inability to deal with the fundamental nature of being affected by feeling of any kind in the first place.

“Being contacted by that same painful feeling, a man harbours aversion towards it. When he harbours aversion towards painful feeling, the underlying tendency to aversion towards painful feeling lies behind this. Being contacted by painful feeling, he seeks delight in sensual pleasure. For what reason? Because the uninstructed worldling does not know of any escape from painful feeling other than sensual pleasure. When he seeks delight in sensual pleasure, the underlying tendency to lust for pleasant feeling lies behind this. He does not understand as it really is the origin and the passing away, the gratification, the danger, and the escape in the case of these feelings. When he does not understand these things, the underlying tendency to ignorance in regard to neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling lies behind this...”

—SN 36:6

If you cease to be affected by an unpleasant feeling, if you cease to be pressured by the pleasant feeling, why then would you need to replace it with any other feeling or act towards getting more of it? You wouldn't. That's why somebody who's free from aversion becomes free from sensuality as well—hand-in-hand. Freedom from sensuality is freedom from aversion. That's pretty much the state of *anāgāmi*.

The practice then is about ceasing to ignore the fundamental na-

ture of the presently enduring feeling, whatever that feeling is—pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. With the guidance of the Suttas and Dhamma talks, which give you pointers to where and what to look for—you must be making that effort to look for it. Not looking for it means automatically ignoring it.

When you have been making an effort in contemplating correctly, and you are touched by an unpleasant feeling, you will be able to discern the choice of attitude you have—either to try and control, manipulate, deal with the world, or simply remove the attitude of resistance in regard to anything you feel. And only one of these choices will result in freedom from suffering.

OVERCOMING DEPRESSION

“Bhikkhus, there are these three feelings.

What three? Pleasant feeling, painful feeling, neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling. The underlying tendency to lust should be abandoned in regard to pleasant feeling. The underlying tendency to aversion should be abandoned in regard to painful feeling. The underlying tendency to ignorance should be abandoned in regard to neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling.

When one experiences pleasure, if one does not understand feeling the tendency to lust is present. For one not seeing the escape from it.

When one experiences pain, if one does not understand feeling the tendency to aversion is present. For one not seeing the escape from it.

The Blessed one has taught with reference to that peaceful feeling, neither-painful-nor-pleasant:

If one seeks delight even in this, One is still not released from suffering.

But when a bhikkhu who is diligent does not neglect clear comprehension, then that wise man fully understands feelings in their entirety.

Having fully understood feelings, He is taintless in this very life. Standing in Dhamma, with the body’s breakup the knowledge-master cannot be measured.”

—SN 36:3

To overcome depression a person needs to realize that depression is not caused by anything *external* to oneself. Even when there might be some external reasons present, depression is a *state of mind*. A state of mind on account of the external world, sure, but not the world itself. It's also state of mind for which one is responsible.

This principle is true for any unpleasant mind state whatsoever—any unpleasant feeling. There is a natural tendency to assume that it's the world and things in the world that upset and affect us. One assumes that one's mental states, good and bad, are caused by what is experienced in the world. Yet if this were true then it wouldn't be possible to free oneself from suffering at all. If the world causes us to suffer, then there would be no choice about it since one has no fundamental control over the world.

Yet, as you can see below, deep down there is always a choice. This is not something easy to admit. This is because admitting that there is a choice makes people jump to conclusions that depression is their *fault*. That's not the case. We are not talking about the faults of one's choices—we are talking about one's *responsibility* for them.

You have a choice to either give in, or not to give in, to what you are feeling at any time—even if those feelings were caused by the world. The mind affected with ignorance, lacking training and restraint, when touched by pleasure will automatically want more of it. This is not a rational and premeditated decision. When agreeable things come, the mind automatically leans towards them, which is the result of an unrestrained mind that has been, and still is, under the influence of ignorance. Likewise, when there is an unpleasant feeling arising, the unrestrained mind will automatically resist it. It will try to get rid of it and prevent it from fully manifesting. It is this gratuitous acceptance of the pleasant, and resistance to the unpleasant, that makes you responsible for what you do on account of your feelings.

Depression, being an *unpleasant* state of mind, is something that has needed time to develop. It has accumulated gradually due to

perpetually seeking safety in desire for pleasures, which fueled more resistance towards pain and any type of discomfort. Even if the world were very unjust at times, one need not be a victim of depression. The problem of the mental state of depression, or any other state rooted in an unpleasant feeling, is not in what happened or why. The problem is that the person is *averse towards it right now*.

That's the sole issue—if depression weren't felt unpleasantly, depression wouldn't be a problem. This is where that responsibility needs to be seen. Responsibility is not in the fact that one is experiencing depression. It is in the fact that one is *resisting the unpleasantness of it*.

The resistance towards pain will remain for as long as one values pleasure, wants it and delights in it. By mentally leaning towards pleasure, one is implicitly leaning away from pain. That's why in the practice of the Dhamma, sense restraint needs to come first. One needs to start saying 'no' to the gratuitous acceptance of pleasures without self-awareness and unrestrained and careless actions.

If you commit to the practice of sense restraint, you'll get to understand where the line is, so to speak. Even if your depression has a specific reason, or no reason at all, and you just feel averse and depressed without a clear cause, the point is—it is unpleasant. If you stop resisting the displeasure of it, depression can have no hold over you. But to be able to stop resisting it, the mind needs to develop first. And especially in regard to things that you can control: sensual desires, your speech and what you frequently choose to think. That's why the Buddha kept talking about "training oneself". These efforts of restraint need repetition—it's not a mere decision you make once and then it is upheld for the rest of your life. No, it's something you have to keep going back to and training yourself in. Drilling it, repeating it.

Thus, if you train the restraint of your senses you can discern the true root of depression and anxiety. And sensuality too, for that matter. If you address the depression on this level, you will not have to worry about the world at all. Because you'll know that if the world affects you, positively or negatively, it can only do so

through the *gateway of your own attitude* of aversion.

It must be emphasized that this ‘gateway’ is your attitude of aversion towards *your own feelings*—aversion towards not having pleasure; aversion towards feeling pain. It’s not an attitude towards the world, or him or her, or anything else external. It’s not towards your past, future, your plans or memories. It is only towards what you are feeling *presently* (on account of the world, him or her, past, present or future). That’s where your attitude matters. If you’re presently *resisting* the feeling (of pain) you will suffer. If you’re presently *welcoming* the feeling (of pleasure), you will suffer. It’s about recognizing that if you are careless about the *presently enduring feeling* in your experience, you will be a victim of your mental states.

If you learn how to train yourself and do not deny the mental states and blame the world, you’ll have a chance of rising above *all* mental states. You’ll need to see that, when there is an agreeable feeling, you shouldn’t blindly go for the pleasure that’s offered in it. If you develop such strength to resist the pull of a pleasant feeling, that same strength will then prevent you from sinking into an unpleasant one, when that occurs. As simple as that.

So if there is any unpleasant mental state don’t try to get rid of it. Don’t blame the world. Recognize the unpleasantness of it and stop trying resisting only *that*. If you wish to not be affected by unpleasant feelings, you have to restrain yourself regarding pleasant feelings. It all depends where the roots of your motivation are.

If you are careless when pleasurable experiences arise for you, e.g. sights, sounds and touches, you will become dependent on them. And because of that be affected when those experiences change and disappear. When there is a pleasure, you overdo going towards it; when there is a pain, you overdo trying to get rid of it. If, on the other hand, you implement the training outlined above, then any long-lasting and persisting issues will start to fade away. Mental states are like habits, they require constant fuel, and the wrong attitudes towards your own feelings provide them with that fuel.

So whatever issues of a psychological nature might be bothering you,

if your behaviour is kept in check, then you will see your responsibility and attitude towards your own feelings. Then none of these states, no matter how long they've been persisting, can exercise any influence over you, because the gateway for any such influence is now always under your watch.

HOW TO DEVELOP SOLITUDE

“Ānanda, a monk does not shine if he delights in company, enjoys company, is committed to delighting in company; if he delights in a group, enjoys a group, rejoices in a group. Indeed, Ānanda, it is impossible that a monk who delights in company, enjoys company, is committed to delighting in company; who delights in a group, enjoys a group, rejoices in a group, will obtain at will—without difficulty, without trouble—the pleasure of renunciation, the pleasure of seclusion, the pleasure of peace, the pleasure of self-awakening. But it is possible that a monk who lives alone, withdrawn from the group, can expect to obtain at will—without difficulty, without trouble—the pleasure of renunciation, the pleasure of seclusion, the pleasure of peace, the pleasure of self-awakening.”

—MN 122

Q: The Buddha encourages the development of seclusion. What then is the best way to cultivate it?

Nyanamoli: You need to start exposing yourself to seclusion gradually. Needing others, however subtly, is quite a serious compromise for someone interested in practising the Dhamma. I’m speaking specifically about needing others for your existential wellbeing and sanity. That’s a massive compromise and a huge risk if you never become independent of it. We are all owners of our actions, fully enclosed within them and ourselves. What you do stays with you. No other person can help you with that or take away from your

burden. It's always on you, your intentions, your decisions, your actions: they always stay within you. You are bound up with your actions and burdened by the results of them. Company makes us forget that.

Thus, you're alone whether you want to be or not. Enclosed within yourself. Most people choose to distract themselves from that truth. Lots of effort is invested in ignoring it. However, the recognition of that profound truth is where the Dhamma practice starts. You can be very close to others, but fundamentally, your feelings, your choices and responsibilities are things only you are privy to. Recognizing this can reveal that heavy burden, and that's exactly what the Buddha meant by saying "beings are the owners of their actions". And the burden accumulates through that ownership and ignorance.

Q: I can tell you how I feel but I cannot give you my experience of that feeling.

Nm: Yes, the dimension of your feeling is inherently inaccessible to anyone but yourself. It can only be felt by *you*. I can give you all the compassion and sympathy in the world, but it is still only you who feels *that feeling*. Existence is solitary and company of others can only be secondary to that. So if somebody wants to overcome *dukkha*, they need to start recognizing the *nature* of their own feelings. Not mask them through seeking approvals or sympathy of others. Thus, for as long as you don't leave the group, how can you develop solitude? If you don't develop solitude, how can you stop covering up the nature of your feelings? How can you see through it? Most importantly, how can you develop and discern that *neutral feeling* that the Buddha praises, for which solitude is necessary?

Most people who are not used to solitude, when they are left alone, boredom is the first result. Which is a lot more problematic than one might initially think. If you stay with your boredom, it will turn into a restless panic, fear, anxiety. And that's when you realize how much you actually depend on your perception of others around you and all the activities that come out of it.

That's why the inherent fear of boredom that most people share. Boredom reveals that deeply seated uneasiness that emerges when you are left alone with yourself and not doing anything. But why

is being with oneself, without others, without distractions such a problem? What is that fear trying to tell us?... Well, it's a number of things, but we won't dwell on that here. The truth of the matter is that boredom is actually "just boredom". There is much more to that non-activity and non-company that people dare to admit to themselves. That's why it's a problem, and that's why it should be understood.

Of course, you can't expect to be able to just jump into solitude and get used to it right away. You could legitimately lose your mind by becoming completely overwhelmed. However, at the same time, do not give in to an excuse to never do it and never prepare yourself for it either. So slowly start practising being alone. Even allow that uneasiness to arise. It will become apparent that solitude mimics something much more primordial than you wish to admit to yourself. It mimics the inherent fear of death and dying that every unenlightened mind carries. Solitude reveals the implicit ending of your means of escape from yourself. The ending of distractions, pleasures of the senses. Cancellation of the company of others. Joys of relationships. It reveals the end that your life is destined to. That's why people fear it and that's why death is the ultimate terror for an ordinary person (*putthujana*) who is existentially dependent upon others, upon sensuality, upon distraction.

Thus, training your mind to get used to, not fear, and see the benefits of solitude, is hard work. But it's the work that is worth doing, for one who wishes to fulfil the Buddha's instruction and practice the Dhamma for the complete liberation.

Even as a layperson, one should at least start preparing oneself for it, even if they never go into complete solitude or ordain into the Sangha, etc. As a monk, the sooner you start the better. You will get sick, you will die, your senses will fail, so don't wait until that happens in order to leave the group. How do you think it will feel when your senses fail? It will feel like you're being confined more and more into one solitary box from which there is no escape. That's the simile the Buddha gave, to that ageing king, of the four mountains coming closer and closer from every direction and eventually crushing you: leaving you no room to escape, or space to move.

In other words, leaving you fewer and fewer chances of distracting yourself with the senses. Removing the last possibility of engaging with sensuality.

“What do you think, great king? Suppose a man, trustworthy and reliable, were to come to you from the east and on arrival would say: ‘If it pleases your majesty, you should know that I come from the east. There I saw a great mountain, as high as the clouds, coming this way, crushing all living beings in its path. Do whatever you think should be done.’

Then a second man were to come to you from the west... Then a third man were to come to you from the north... Then a fourth man were to come to you from the south and on arrival would say: ‘If it pleases your majesty, you should know that I come from the south. There I saw a great mountain, as high as the clouds, coming this way, crushing all living beings. Do whatever you think should be done.’

If, great king, such a great peril should arise, such a terrible destruction of human life—the human state being so hard to obtain—what should be done?”

—“If, lord, such a great peril should arise, such a terrible destruction of human life—what else should be done but conduct according to the Dhamma, right conduct, skilful deeds, meritorious deeds?”

—“I inform you, great king, I announce to you, great king: aging and death are rolling in on you!”

—SN 3:25

Of course, being with others can be beneficial in the beginning. A group of like-minded people you can learn from can be helpful. But it’s beneficial inasmuch as a school is helpful for somebody who’s learning a craft. However, the school can’t do the craft for you. Especially when that craft is “solitude”.

Q: It says in SN 45.2:

Venerable Ānanda approaches the Buddha and says:

“Venerable sir, this is half of the holy life, that is, good friendship, good companionship, good comradeship.”

“Not so, Ānanda! Not so, Ānanda! This is the entire holy life, Ānanda, that is, good friendship, good companionship, good comradeship. When a bhikkhu has a good friend, a good companion, a good comrade, it is to be expected that he will develop and cultivate the Noble Eightfold Path.

And how, Ānanda, does a bhikkhu who has a good friend, a good companion, a good comrade, develop and cultivate the Noble Eightfold Path? Here, Ānanda, a bhikkhu develops right view, which is based upon seclusion, dispassion, and cessation, maturing in release. He develops right intention; right speech; right action; right livelihood; right effort; right mindfulness; right composure, which is based upon seclusion, dispassion, and cessation, maturing in release. It is in this way, Ānanda, that a bhikkhu who has a good friend, a good companion, a good comrade, develops and cultivates the Noble Eightfold Path.”

Nm: As you can see, the Buddha describes what he means by “kalyāṇamitta” (spiritual friend). It doesn’t refer to someone who you just get on with and you enjoy their company. It’s actually someone who can direct you and assist you in the cultivation of the Noble Eightfold Path. Who inspires you and fills you with a *sense of urgency* to commit to the practice of Dhamma before it’s too late. Even if you have never met them in person. Just as none of us have met the Buddha, yet our entire holy life now is determined by him. That’s the friendship the Buddha refers to in the same Sutta above:

“By the following method too, Ānanda, it may be understood how the entire holy life is good friendship, good companionship, good comradeship: *by relying upon me as a good friend*, Ānanda, beings subject to birth are freed

from birth; beings subject to ageing are freed from ageing; beings subject to death are freed from death; beings subject to sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair are freed from sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair. By this method, Ānanda, it may be understood how the entire holy life is good friendship, good companionship, good comradeship.”

By taking the Buddha as a friend, his teaching becomes our company. On account of it we make the Right effort and eventually experience liberation. So in that sense 'friendship' with a Noble One is essential (even just to the extent of hearing their Teaching second hand). It is the solitude where that friendship bears fruit. That's not negotiable. That's why the Buddha would encourage the monks with the Right view to go into solitude, to go to an empty hut or root of a tree. And the person with the Right view will actually do it rightly. They won't be using solitude for any wrong reasons. So if you wish to develop the necessary ability to go into solitude, you shouldn't expect that ability overnight. But that doesn't mean that you shouldn't start gradually preparing yourself for it. If you want to develop any form of strength, for example, you acknowledge your weakness first. Then you realize what needs to be developed in order to overcome that which you lack.

APPOINTMENT WITH DEATH

“The world is undermined by death and limited by old age.
Affected by the thorn of craving, and perfumed with long-
ing.”
—Thag 6:13

Q: I was wondering if you could speak about the con-
templation of death—how should we think about it?

Nyanamoli: Walking, standing, sitting or lying down, you should be dwelling on the fact that you might die. That’s the ultimate context. That context is what death is. It’s the ultimate context of your life—it’s a non-negotiable context. People might think: “I must be going through the motions and methods of practising mindfulness of death, thinking about it when I’m walking, sitting.” That’s true only in the sense that you need to discern the most fundamental, always present possibility of death, which is what makes it such an ultimate context of your life. Everything else within your life can come and go—what has been or could have not been. But one thing is for sure: when life is there, death is implicit; it is guaranteed as the final outcome of it.

The reason why people are oppressed by their desires, burdened by their intentions and unskilful actions, is because they turn a blind eye to this very factual liability to death. Death that can come at any given moment. Pretty much everything unwholesome, that a person can engage in, is a result of ignoring the fact that they will die, that they will not always be healthy, not always be young. By being intoxicated by those things, you entertain your sense desires,

you want more of them. But all you need do is uncover that fundamental context and accept the certainty of death, and that will automatically prevent you from running too far down the rabbit hole of desires. And that's what mindfulness of death is.

Obviously, you can do this practice loosely, on a very low level. But you can also start expanding it and realize that death is so close you might not even see the end of this day. You don't necessarily have to become neurotic about it, thinking "I will die, I will die." But you do have to recognize that this possibility-of-death is so immediate that you might not see the end of the day—the end of the morning. You might not have enough time to finish your meal. You might not have enough time to breathe out once you breathe in. That's how much you're fundamentally not in control of your life. That doesn't mean that you should be repeating to yourself that you will die every second of the day. That's not contemplation of death, that's just a mechanical repetition of the idea of what death is for you. You want to *understand* that context of death, and not feel affected by it.

As for "mindfulness" of death—whenever there is a principle of mindfulness, there is a principle of *peripheral awareness*. By being mindful of the context of death with regard to your day-to-day life, that's already the practice of peripheral awareness. In order to practice this contemplation correctly, a person will have to withdraw themselves from distractions, from company, and set some solitary time to start thinking about it. (Just like with any other meditation.) If you don't know where to start, just think about the nature of death that is inescapable to you. Then you take that further and start thinking: "OK, so what would be the real significance of this life that is fully under the control of death?" Because whatever you do in this life cannot help you step outside of the *liability to death*. It cannot free you from death. That order cannot change—it doesn't matter what you do, doesn't matter what you distract yourself with, doesn't matter what you accomplish in this life. Fundamentally that whole thing—as much as you developed it, as far as it proliferates—is still fully within the domain of death. You simply can't change that. What you can do is *stop ignoring it*. The practice then would be in recognizing this "right order", seeing what is more fundamental and what comes first so to speak. Whatever you do in this life will be *within* your liability to sickness, ageing, and death. That context is something you need to keep at the back of your mind. You need to *know* that: While I'm doing this or that, I might die. It's highly unlikely that I will die as a result of sitting in my room reading a book, but death is equally present there because my life depends upon working organs, beating heart, breathing lungs. And those things can *never* be in my control.

So, you want to see that your life is undermined by the random operation of organs inaccessible to your will power.

Q: What about this example? It's like someone who has chosen a job which requires them to be on call 24/7. Whatever they do has to be done with that in the back of their mind.

Nm: That's what I mean by context. It's not a context you can be indifferent about, because it's the context that undermines and affects your life. It's a context that fills you with *concern*, as it should. That's what the Buddha meant by "invoking the sense of urgency" for practice. The simile for this would be, for example, you have a job interview. You have one shot at something that can change your life in a week's time. Whatever you do that week, this will be at the back of your mind because it is so important—there is a degree of concern with regard to it. Now imagine if that one shot is death—it's not a random interview that can go either way, it's as fundamental as losing your life. So, you realize what kind of concern that would be, peripherally, and how much influence that would exert on your choices and decisions during that week.

Also, you can have a job appointment at an exact time, exact day, but the appointment with death is uncertain in the sense that it can arise at any given time. That appointment might be today, might be tomorrow, might be in 10 years' time. You cannot forget about it because it can be here the next moment and if you forget about it you might fail. Whatever you do in this life, you do it on the basis of not forgetting about the ultimate context of your liability to die. You don't cover up the certainty of death. You can already see how much less you would be pulled by the fleeting desires of the senses, distractions and so on—they just would not have any value if you wouldn't forget you'll die.

If you have any doubt about it, just recollect when you feared for your life for a period of time, on account of anything: illness or an accident or whatever. Then see how much interest you had in the world during that period of time. Very little. You were not enjoying your food, you were not finding solace in friends and distractions or whatever else. This was the most pressing thing. So, it's about reconnecting to that context that is always there, you don't have to fabricate it, you just have to stop covering it up. And covering would stop if you would restrain the constant influx of sensuality and intentions towards distraction. Thus, if you always feel like you're on call—called upon by death—that already means you are developing

that proper context. And that context will now shape your other decisions. It will make you more careful about all things in your life.

This kind of practice can be a bit too intense for some people—the *concern* revealed can overwhelm you. That’s why the virtue and sense restraint needs to be thoroughly developed beforehand. With it, you would rapidly develop dispassion towards everything in your life. And that’s why the Buddha praised it as the quickest way to free your mind from any unwholesome states, ignorance, avoidance of responsibility and so on. However, if it is too much, then you can practice mindfulness of breathing because it has the same result but is slower and more gradual. You can recollect that your fully controlled act of breathing depends on things that are not your own *while* you’re breathing. This means that your sense of control is undermined and fundamentally dependent upon things you cannot control.

Q: So, one of the most important things to keep in mind is that one has an appointment with death.

Nm: Yes. Another thing to keep in mind is, if you think you are practising mindfulness of death and making the correct effort, then you should ask yourself: “Is my mind getting angry? Is my mind getting lustful?” If the answer is yes, it means you haven’t established the *context* of death. If you had, these things would not be able to even arise—let alone persist.

The only way you can be triggered by various matters—the only way you could be emotionally affected by anything, is if you have lost sight of the context of death.

The practice of mindfulness of death is about clarifying the understanding of that inherent context in whatever you do. The context of that ultimate final cessation that you cannot even conceive escaping from. That’s because if you think about escaping from it, the thoughts of that escape are already within the context of death. You’re fully enclosed by it. That’s why it can be quite frightening, like being buried alive for example. You’re still alive, but you realize that escape from this is inconceivable.

One needs to start admitting to oneself what’s obvious right from the start—as soon as you’re born, you’re old enough to die. The second you’re conceived, you’re liable to death. And that’s it. It’s not negotiable. People might say: “You shouldn’t be thinking about this because you won’t enjoy life.” And that’s true: you won’t enjoy

life in an unwholesome sense anymore. However, you will certainly appreciate it in a new wholesome way—as a possibility for developing wisdom that can free you from death. As a possibility for doing good, and even showing others who are willing to learn. There is still plenty you can do in this life within the context of death, that won't be as futile as simply distracting yourself from the obvious truths or endlessly pursuing sensuality.

As frightening as this type of contemplation might be, you need to be developing yourself regarding that which scares you. Because understanding something requires you to stop running away from it first.

Q: The Buddha said in AN 6:20 that a monk should think:

“There are many possible causes for my death. A snake might bite me, a scorpion might sting me, a centipede might bite me. That would be how my death would come about. That would be an obstruction for me. Stumbling, I might fall; my food, digested, might trouble me; my bile might be provoked, my phlegm... piercing wind forces might be provoked. That would be how my death would come about. That would be an obstruction for me.’ Then the monk should investigate: ‘Are there any evil, unskillful qualities unabandoned by me that would be an obstruction for me were I to die in the night?’ If, on reflecting, he realizes that there are evil, unskillful qualities unabandoned by him that would be an obstruction for him were he to die in the night, then he should put forth extra desire, effort, diligence, endeavor, relentlessness, mindfulness, alertness for the abandoning of those very same evil, unskillful qualities.”

Nm: He thinks these things to re-evoke the context of “I am susceptible to die at any given moment.” Having established that context, he doesn't need to keep thinking about it because now, whatever he does, that context is maintained in the background. He is *feeling it*.

Mindfulness, when properly developed, is on the level of knowledge. It means that whatever thing is present in your experience, the context is also there, present as *knowledge*. And that's why mindfulness, memory and recollection go hand-in-hand. It's not a mechanical focusing technique that you do on account of different meditation 'objects'—it's the knowledge of the context regarding any situation you are in.

I think Ajahn Chah gave a similar example. It's like a mother who has to do work outside and leaves her baby in the house. So, she's out there only for the amount of time required to finish the work. She doesn't linger, she doesn't forget about her baby, she doesn't distract herself from it. It means whatever she's doing, she still maintains the importance of that certain context. And when she's done, she returns to the baby. It's the same with the development of mind, the development of mindfulness—you keep the context in mind as though it were your precious child.

"Why would I then be breaking the precepts, why would I then be careless, when I might die within 10 seconds? My heart might stop". Then you might think: "It probably won't." But it *might*. That's more than enough for that right type of concern to arise. You could go as far as to say that the *entire* Noble Eightfold Path is predicated upon developing the *Right concern*. That's what the Buddha meant when he said: "I'm only teaching suffering and freedom from it." That means you need to know how to see suffering properly—the Right concern, the Right displeasure. The nature of recognizing that it's not a choice, and it's not negotiable either. It cannot be compared to other concerns, it's more fundamental than anything.

To practice mindfulness of death, make sure your virtue is unbroken. Practice sense restraint. And then just sit quietly and think, for example, about your beating heart or your breathing lungs. Don't negate anything—there's nothing to negate. Just be aware that you are breathing now, but you might not be able to. That your entire life depends on your heart continuing to beat, yet you have no say in it. Then *endure* that recognition.

Q: You could think, "how is it possible for me to die, or how is the possibility of death present?"

Nm: You might have to start like that. But you don't want to merely find an intellectual answer to that. You want to *feel* a sense

of concern. That's when you recognize that it's that concern that needs to be developed. It must not be distracted from, must not be covered up, must not be ignored. You must not be trying to get rid of it either. It's establishing the concern, the context of death and then allowing it to endure.

Q: Therefore, just as a contemplation, whatever you're doing, try to see that possibility of death therein. Like, I'm sitting now, so how could death come to me? I could fall off my chair and hit my head.

Nm: Sure, I understand what you're saying, but the point I'm making is that you can do that only initially before it becomes that mechanical visualization of how you might die. When things become mechanical and impersonal, there will be no underlying concern for your life that you are after. That's why you can't just be focused on what you're going to think—you have to focus on that emotional background of being liable to death, in which case you don't even need to think particularly "I will die because my heart will stop, or I'll fall off the chair". You just need to think "I will die; I could die," and you already *feel* that.

Q: It's basically about 'picking up the sign'.

Nm: Picking up the sign, exactly. The theme, the context, the peripheral knowledge of the actual possibilities of death. And that's going to be initially an unpleasant concern. Afterwards, the displeasure of that concern disappears because you will stop resisting it through the contemplation of its inevitability. You might be apprehensive, but none of that would become full blown fear and dread and pain at the prospect of death. Why? Because you're not as intoxicated with life as you were before. And you are not as intoxicated because you stopped maintaining the intoxication, that was maintained through ignoring the concern about the life that's liable to death. So yes, if you want to do meditation on death, think about your beating heart—you can feel it beating—but can you have any intentional say in it? You realize, no. If this thing stops—in the same sense that a branch falls, a cup gets knocked over—the heart stops. You realize the heart is on the level of these random things in the world that can just change because of the elements, because of the wind, because of whatever. But if that does happen, my life is over. So, my entire life—my sense of mastery, my sense of control—depends on something as silly as a cup being knocked over, a valve just going 'boop'. A pump just ceasing to pump or getting blocked.

If the pump gets blocked for 10 seconds, that might be enough to kill me. And it is inconceivable to have a say in that.

That's why, if your virtue and sense restraint are unbroken, you will not be overwhelmed by fear and anxiety. As you persevere through it, and fully maintain this context, dispassion will be the inevitable result—Arahantship. Full Awakening, through abandoning life before it abandons you. “Die before you die,” as Ajahn Chah used to say.

Q: “When covered, it rains too much; When uncovered, it does not rain too much. Therefore, uncover the cover, thus it will not rain too much.” —Thag 6:13, 447.

Nm: You will get more affected by the rain if you fear it. Even if you don't get wet, the fear of getting wet is already soaking you. And it same goes for death. A person who never allows themselves to think about their own death and feel the weight of it, is a person that gets “affected” by that death more.

So you're going to get affected by death, or even by anything unpleasant, for as long as you're covering things up from yourself. All these truths are there, obvious in a way, but you need to make the effort of undoing the cover-up for them to be discerned. So, it's not like finding a new way out, it's basically just stopping of covering up what's obvious. The certainty of death, the certainty of non-control, the certainty of change.

If you want to meditate on it, set aside half an hour or whatever you have without any distractions, think about your liability to death until you develop that context that slightly (or not so slightly) concerns you, and then just allow it to endure. If you're thinking, “What do I do next?” Nothing. All you do is make sure that this context remains transparent for this half hour that you're meditating, nothing else. So, if your thoughts start coming, you let them, while you still keep a corner of your eye on that context. If you go away and realize you forgot, then you go back to the context. And again, just let your mind start going again, but not losing sight of the context. That's the practice of mindfulness that results in *sammāditṭhi*, which then feeds mindfulness—because you're learning how to not forget about the context, even when other things are happening, and that's life. So, whatever's happening in your day-to-day life, then you still have that context at the back of your mind. That is the unshakeable mindfulness that is the proper *marāṇasati*.

Whether you're eating, breathing in, breathing out, the context remains at the back, and you've not lost connection with it. It doesn't mean you must have it all the time in front of you, quite the opposite. It means you should be able to go as far as you want, but you still don't completely lose sight of it.

If you think "have I lost sight of it?", then check if there's greed, aversion, or delusion in your mind—is there desire for distraction, carelessness, sensuality, ill will, anger? If yes, then you did lose the sight. Because when you're rooted in the context, these things cannot arise. Amidst sensuality, amidst irritable things, they can't arise, because they require passion which is incompatible with the mindfulness of death. Passion requires ignorance of the fact that this is all subject to certain destruction—but if you don't ignore that anymore, it means you can't engage in passion anymore.

That's what the Buddha meant when he said those people who are not mindful—as in those who are not aware of that context—are as if dead already. They're fully under that weight of death. The only way to not partake in it, to not be affected by it, is to fully understand that context of death. So, by being unmindful, you're fully subscribed, fully covered up, fully cocooned in that liability of certain death. It means you're as if dead—it doesn't matter if it's in five minutes or fifty years.

The true meaning of life would be to find that which is not permeable by death. That which is not subject to it.

Hence, mindfulness is the path to the deathless—peripheral awareness of that context will take you out of the confinement of it, through understanding. You're going to give up passion, any appropriation, any relationship with it—with everything that's liable to death, which your experience as a whole, your life, past, future—all of it. It's all about removing the emotional connection and appropriation of it. And you will know you're removing it, because if you think about losing your life there will be no concern arising any more.

Q: There's also an idea that one must practice so that when death happens, one will be able to control it in a nice way.

Nm: Yes, that's what I meant with what I was describing before. For people that are so used to just focusing on what's in front of them, they think if they just learn the art of focusing, regardless

of what the nature of the things they're focusing on is, when death comes in front of them, they'll be able to attend it rightly. But it's not about attending to what's in front of you, it's about *knowing* what's simultaneously "behind" you while you are attending to this or that.

If you want to practice towards not being affected by the experience of death when it comes, you start practising towards not being affected by any experience in this life, even now. So, ask yourself: "Am I affected by the arisen desires of sensuality, or ill will, or distraction, or carelessness? Yes, I'm affected by it. If these worldly things affect me and move me so much, how can I expect to be unmoved in the face of death when it comes? Impossible!

So, that's then your job: training to not be affected by anything that pressures you, agreeable or disagreeable. The only way you won't be affected by death is if life itself stops affecting you.

Q: Whatever arises, it arises within a context.

Nm: There's always a context, yes. To everything, internally, there's a context, which is why people spend most of their time covering it up because it always reveals that which you don't necessarily want to see. Or rather, it takes time and effort to be able to get used to seeing it and then not suffer on account of it. That's why one's life, the entire *saṃsāra*, and the whole of sensuality goes with the grain—it's effortless to turn a blind eye, it's effortless to engage with sensuality. So, you need to start making the effort to pull yourself out of it, and then you will be able to appreciate sense restraint, solitude, non-distraction, non-ill will. You won't naturally value those things. Effort and wisdom are against the nature. Nature which tries to keep you under its thumb of mortality.

That's what meditation is, whatever your object of it might be. Developing the same principle: the peripheral enduring context that becomes imperturbable regarding things that are within it. Or "inferior to it" as the Suttas would say. Things that are actually presenting themselves. That's why the Buddha said: "He establishes his mind in the divine abiding of the *jhāna* and—whether he sits, walks, urinates, defecates, eats—his mind is established in that state," because all these activities are "inferior" to his context.

Q: You don't create death.

Nm: No, that's the whole point. In the same sense, you don't create the Dhamma. Even the Buddha said it's just an ancient path that was covered and he uncovered it. He didn't create anything—it's just the discernment of these universal truths. Therefore, that's what meditation should be revolving around—it doesn't matter if you do it for fifteen minutes or for five hours. Establish your mind upon the greater context that is an infertile basis for any passion and ill will—that cannot exist in that context. And then you let that context endure until your mind gets established in it. And you know your mind is established in it when you cannot be passionate, you cannot be affected by the arisen feeling, pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. And then you also know, when you're about to do something, if it's going to make you more firmly established in that context, or it's going to take you away from it. The choice becomes much clearer: "This is unwholesome, this is wholesome." Unwholesome means it takes you away from the wholesome context. Wholesome means it keeps you within the wholesome context.

Q: In line with the truth.

Nm: Yes, within that domain, your actions do not contradict it, they don't abolish it, they don't drag you down from it. That's why Devadatta, once he started engaging in unwholesome acts, was unable to keep his mind in *jhāna*. It wasn't some magical energy that got trapped or evaporated. It's just that unwholesomeness contradicts the domain of it.

If you choose to engage in it, you choose to then forsake this: the greater context. And the only way to develop the greater context is to keep discerning it, keep thinking about it, keep trying to establish it, allowing it to endure. Not trying to get rid of it just because it might feel unpleasant. That's why you can't crave for it either. You can't crave for *jhāna*. You can't crave for the imperturbable, wholesome *samādhi* because craving is always toward the actual experience. Not the context of it. Feeling in regard to the actual thing—that's what you crave for. But this is the context of it, and now your mind is established in that, which means your mind then becomes unreachable by any craving. So, if people want to know how to make this context endure, you don't do it, you can't make it endure—because that's like you're still trying to make it 'in front of you'. So, you make it endure by stopping trying to make it endure. You make it endure by thinking about it, but by not interfering with it either. In the same sense as the example we gave of the appointment—the life-changing appointment you have—you don't need to make it endure. It's already there. All you need to do

is to stop distracting yourself from it.

Q: You can't cancel the appointment.

Nm: No, you cannot. So, you realize the recognition of that is already a form of endurance, even if you don't necessarily feel fully concerned about it. Still, you are aware of the context that whatever you do, it's going to end, all of it. It can end even before you realize it will end. Your beating heart right now can stop. Allow that thought to endure—don't overthink it, don't give in to fear of it—just allow it to endure. And then see other things that appear in your mind against the endurance of that thought—because you're not looking for a specific answer of "This is how it is" or "This is how it will be." You're looking for the evoking of the context of being liable to death—that's how you create that connection.

So, while I'm sitting here, secluded from unwholesomeness, secluded from distraction, what if this beating muscle in my chest were to stop? Don't answer it, don't provide an excuse or an explanation, just allow that question to sink in. What if it were to stop? And then the mind will think about it, but all that is secondary, still allow just the question to endure. Then the thought comes, "my heart will stop." Allow that to endure. Then your timer rings, your meditation is finished. OK, fine, but you realize that context still hasn't changed. You go about your duties and you still have that context enduring, and you will forget it only when you engage in unwholesomeness—lust, aversion or delusion.

That's why you need to meditate in this manner as much as you can until that context becomes imperturbable. You will also see that you need a basis of sense restraint, physical restraint, as a guardian for not losing that context. And then your bodily behaviour, speech, or mental behaviour doesn't take you as far back into the unwholesomeness, and therefore you won't have to undo it as much. Hence, virtue comes first. It's necessary.

If the context is enduring—you still haven't forgotten that your beating heart might stop, that you're fundamentally liable to death, you have a degree of concern—you might think what do I do now? Well, you include the thought of "What do I do now?" against that context, and you realize you don't do anything, you don't need to do anything.

Is the context still there? Yes.

Whatever might happen to me, would it be against the backdrop of that context? Yes.

Whatever I might do with my life, immediately or in the future, is this context changeable? No.

So, are my engagements with life or with people worthy—against this context, in this new light of the new context? Is it worth it to be so emotionally disturbed by not getting what you want? Not really.

If you're in that context, being affected by things such as sensuality becomes inconceivable. So all you need to do is find ways of maintaining the context, regardless of whether you're sitting in a protected meditation environment or not. Hence seated, walking, lying down, extending your arms, eating, urinating, defecating, whatever you do, you maintain the context, day and night. To the extent necessary for obliterating any ground for passion to manifest again. All passion. And that's the meditation "object" of death.

TRUTH ABOUT THE FIVE HINDRANCES

“Monks, there are these five hindrances. Which five? Sensual desire as a hindrance, ill will as a hindrance, sloth and drowsiness as a hindrance, restlessness and anxiety as a hindrance, and doubt as a hindrance. These are the Five hindrances.”

—AN 9:64

The first thing is to understand what the hindrances are. They are not things that occasionally arise in you before they go away, and then you go back about your day. They go much deeper than that. The hindrances are on the level of your currently enduring existence as *a whole*, they are the way you regard the entire world at the time.

So in day-to-day life, one’s mind is always within the *domain* of the hindrances. Even if one is not gripped by some strong defilement at the time. The fact is that at any given time one’s mind is *liable* to lust, anger, sloth, restlessness or doubt, means that at any given time that mind is still well within the domain of the five hindrances.

The only time a mind can step outside of the domain and extent of the five hindrances is when a person has diligently abandoned joys and griefs regarding *the entire world*. It’s when a person has become completely secluded from all the *unwholesome states*. It’s in the first *jhāna*.

The first *jhāna* is pleasure born of sense of a safety upon the sur-

mounting of one's entire existential situation. That means that a person who develops and cultivates the *jhāna* is not only free from lust, aversion and delusion at that time; they are also free from the *liability* to those defilements as well. This is important to note, because as long as people think that hindrances are these particular states of mind that come and go, they will never be properly uprooted.

If, on the other hand, one understands that “even if I am not experiencing any specific hindrance right now, I am still liable to them. I am still within the hindrances’ domain and thus, not free of them.” This kind of reflection will force a person to broaden their context and look for the solution further than the immediate management of currently arisen lust, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and doubt.

If, for example, you are not sure whether you are liable to lust or not, that means you are. The hindrance of doubt is there, and thus the domain of the five hindrances is there. If you are liable to one hindrance you are liable to them all. There are the five hindrances, not three and a half or two, so it's always the five different ways that comprise *one domain* that hinders you.

You need to start thinking of them, not as individual things but as something that your world is within. Even your current sense restraint and even your Dhamma practice. Everything is within that domain of the five hindrances. The only time you are not within them is in the first *jhāna*, as above. That is why the one who surmounts them in *jhāna*, abides in the joy of seclusion from *all* unwholesome states, even when walking, sitting, eating or going to the toilet, etc.:

“...But, Master Gotama, what is the celestial high and luxurious bed that at present you gain at will, without trouble or difficulty?”

“Here, brahmin, when I am dwelling in dependence on a village or town, in the morning I dress, take my bowl and robe, and enter that village or town for alms. After the meal, when I have returned from the alms round, I enter a grove. I collect some grass or leaves that I find there into

a pile and then sit down. Having folded my legs crosswise and straightened my body, I bring mindfulness to the fore. Then, secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, I enter and dwell in the *first jhāna*...

Then, brahmin, when I am in such a state, if I walk back and forth, on that occasion my walking back and forth is celestial. If I am standing, on that occasion my standing is celestial. If I am sitting, on that occasion my sitting is celestial. If I lie down, on that occasion this is my celestial high and luxurious bed. This is that celestial high and luxurious bed that at present I can gain at will, without trouble or difficulty.”

—AN 3:63

The Five Hindrances Are One In Unwholesomeness

So once you start seeing that all that is happening is within the domain of the Five hindrances, and that liability to them means that they are already there, then you will get to see that you are not responsible for the hindrances arising. The manifestation of lust, ill will, sloth and so on, that’s not actually your doing. What is your doing is *being hindered by* those manifestations. So, it doesn’t matter which hindrance or liability to hindrance is present. In themselves, hindrances cannot hinder you. The domain of the hindrances is the domain of the unwholesome of any kind, and all you need to do is look closely at why you are liable to that domain to begin with.

The answer is quite simple: it’s because some of those unwholesome states you don’t recognize as unwholesome. It’s because your criteria for determining what is unwholesome is not sufficiently developed and clarified. That’s why some of the things and mental states that should not be welcomed, delighted in and entertained—you ignorantly welcome, delight in and entertain.

The Chief Hindrance And The Foremost Danger

What is the chief hindrance on account of which people let the other four hindrances in? Which unwholesome thing is usually not seen as unwholesome?

It’s sensuality, of course. Delight and lust. It is not seen as wrong

and the deep danger of it is not something that is apparent. Thus, by welcoming and accepting the arisen prospects of sensual desires, you are automatically welcoming and accepting the *domain of the five hindrances*. That means that when restlessness and anxiety arise, although you will not want it, you have already opened the door for it from before, when you opened the door to sensuality. Thus, through accepting one, you place yourself on the ground that is flooded by them all. That's where the crux of that recognition of danger in sensuality is. By accepting sensuality you are becoming simultaneously liable to everything else that is painful and unwholesome. Such as anxiety, worry, doubt, fear and so on. And that liability remains, for as long as you maintain an attitude of welcoming sensual pleasures. Like consuming a perfect tasty drink that has poison in it. You cannot taste, smell nor see the poison, but it enters you as you enjoy the taste of the drink.

Thus, through willingly entertaining sensuality you are willingly accepting anxiety, worry, fear, dullness, depression, confusion, and everything else that comes from the domain of the unwholesome. When this "poison", this danger, is discerned as what sensuality actually is, then no amount of sensual pleasures will be able to make you accept it and say "yes" to it.

"There are ascetics and brahmins in the present who see the things that seem nice and pleasant in the world as impermanent, as suffering, as not-self, as diseased, and as dangerous. They give up craving. Giving up craving, they give up attachments. Giving up attachments, they give up suffering. Giving up suffering, they are freed from rebirth, old age, and death, from sorrow, lamentation, pain, sadness, and distress. They are freed from suffering, I say."

"Suppose there was a bronze cup of beverage that had a nice colour, aroma, and flavour. But it was mixed with poison. Then along comes a man struggling in the oppressive heat, weary, thirsty, and parched. They'd say to him: 'Here, mister, this bronze cup of beverage has a nice colour, aroma, and flavour. Drink it if you like. If you drink it, its nice colour, aroma, and flavour will refresh you. But drinking it will result in death or deadly pain.' Then that man might think: 'I could quench my thirst with water, whey, or broth. But I shouldn't drink that beverage, for it would be for my lasting harm and

suffering.’ He’d reject that beverage. After appraisal, he wouldn’t drink it, and it wouldn’t result in death or deadly pain.”

–SN 12:66

By seeing the connection between welcoming sensuality and the simultaneous ingestion of poison that is hidden in it, you will then realize that no amount of sensuality is worth accepting. No benefit of sensual pleasures can outweigh that risk. That’s when the “danger becomes apparent” as the Suttas often say:

“I, a monk, went to a charnel ground, And saw a woman left there,

Discarded in a cemetery, full of worms that devoured her.

Some men were disgusted, seeing her dead and rotten;

But sexual desire arose in me, I was as if blind to her oozing body.

Quicker than the boiling of rice, I left that place,

Mindful and aware, I sat down to one side.

Then my attention gained a perspective—

The danger became apparent,

And I was firmly repulsed.

Then my mind was liberated—

See the excellence of the Dhamma!

I’ve attained the three knowledges,

And fulfilled the Buddha’s instructions.”

–Thag. 5:1

Thus, the only actual reason people keep engaging with sensuality is because they do not see the danger of it.

“...When these five hindrances are unabandoned in himself, a bhikkhu sees them respectively as a debt, a disease, a prison, slavery, and a road across a desert. But when these

five hindrances have been abandoned in himself, he sees that as freedom from debt, health, release from prison, freedom from slavery, and a land of safety.”

“Having abandoned these five hindrances, imperfections of the mind that weaken wisdom, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, he enters upon and abides in the *first jhāna*.”

—MN 39

That sense of safety and relief does not come from ‘nobody knocking on your door and threatening you’. It comes from you knowing how not to open that door through which harm can come your way. The safety comes from not welcoming sensuality through which other hindrances would enter you. The reason why this is actually very good news is because it’s entirely up to you. Welcoming sensuality or not doesn’t depend on the circumstances, it depends on your choice only. You can always say no to welcoming sensuality on the levels of your thoughts and actions. That means you don’t have to worry if sensuality is at your door. You don’t have to try to chase it away or fight it. All you need to do is not open the door, and just endure its outside presence until it leaves you alone.

Furthermore, ask yourself: what is my attitude when the thought of sensuality arises? When it is at the door? Do I see it as agreeable, as a friend, dear to me and not wishing me any harm? Or do I discern its deceitfulness, the poison, the hunter’s trap? Do I see the danger simultaneous with opening the door and letting it in?

It’s important to note that you cannot simply choose to not welcome sensuality once, and be free, since your mind has been accepting it and welcoming it for a very long time. You will have to contemplate the danger in it. Endure it when it arises. Only then will your habitual welcoming of it begin to slowly fade. So if you keep practising sense restraint and keeping the precepts, contemplation of the danger can actually bear fruit. Then you will also understand the gratification, the escape and the way that leads to the escape from sensuality and the Five hindrances as a whole.

HOW TO CALM YOUR MIND

“There is the case, Mahānāma, where a disciple of the noble ones is consummate in virtue, guards the doors to his sense faculties, knows the right measure in eating, is devoted to wakefulness, is endowed with seven qualities, and obtains at will—without trouble or difficulty—the four *jhāna* that constitute heightened awareness and a pleasant abiding here and now.”

—MN 53

I talk a lot about the right endurance and restraint. That’s because the Buddha was quite clear that that is the necessary prerequisite for any successful meditation. It’s very important to keep reminding yourself of that. Unless you are fully restrained, curbed and in control of your senses, you will not be meditating rightly. Regardless of how much effort and hours you put into it. It would be like spending a lot of time carefully and meticulously planting seeds... in barren ground.

“A bhikkhu is virtuous, he dwells restrained by the rules of the *Pātimokkha*, accomplished in conduct and behaviour, seeing danger in the slightest fault, and having undertaken them, he trains with the training rules.”

—AN 3:90

So, as the Suttas on gradual training say, a person needs to come to the point of being watchful on account of “seeing the danger in the slightest fault”. Of course, all these prerequisites can create an

impression that it's all about enduring and more enduring. And in a way it is, but there is a point at which a person can begin to learn how to calm down *within* that very endurance. And that's the correct place of *samādhi* in the practice. Learning how to calm down, without abandoning your patient endurance and sense restraint, and without turning back to sensuality, can make that same pressuring endurance not unpleasant at all. "Patient endurance is the foremost austerity" that, paired with right *samādhi*, can be quite agreeable.

Thus, as already said earlier in this book, you cannot meditate rightly without the Right view. This statement can be a bit too abstract for people. The practical reason behind this statement is that your meditation will not be within the right endurance that needs to be calmed. Without the Right view, it will always be rooted, however subtly, in your aversion towards the unpleasantness of the enduring sense restraint. In other words, such meditation would aim to get rid of the pain that you are averse to. Such meditation would be for the *management* of pain, not the *uprooting* of it. On the other hand, meditation with the Right view will aim at calming your resistance to the pain of the endurance to which you are averse. That's why many people end up frustrated with their meditation techniques, since deep down inside, they follow them for the sake of getting rid of the pain. They do not fulfil and perfect the requirements for gradual training, which is why they cannot get through the inherent aversion to pain (which is where the true suffering is).

Endurance and the build up of the gradual training is simply not negotiable. How much you are going to suffer on account of it is. How much your mind will experience pressure and torment on account of sense restraint can be reduced with meditation rooted in the correct motivation. In simple terms, you don't want to be meditating for the sake of managing the pain of endurance. You want to be meditating for the sake of calming your aversion towards endurance so that you can then endure even more. Or as much as necessary for the final uprooting of defilements.

Q: So, a person is enduring, not giving in to defilements. The pressure builds up more, and the person puts up with it. What then?

Nyanamoli: That's the endurance: putting up with the pressure without trying to get rid of it. So, the first thing is to prevent yourself from acting out of pressure too often. Then, while you are full

of pressure caused by sense restraint, full of doubt, anxiety, temptations... What else is there that you are doing that is effortless and neutral? It's breathing in and breathing out. That's what's there. It doesn't require any special way of attending to it, it doesn't require any extra effort. It's something that you can always be aware of at the back of your mind, as something that is there, inseparable from you, done by the body regardless of what mental states and experiences you are going through at the same time.

That's why when the Buddha described the practice of *anāpānasati*, he always said:

“Mindful he breathes in, mindful he breathes out.”

—SN 54:9

That's how it always starts. A simple *knowledge* of your breathing happening right there “beneath” whatever you are going through. And you don't have to stop enduring on account of it either. It's there together with the pressure of sense restraint. You can see that breath happening to you, so to speak, while you are gripped by temptations and hindrances. But the breath remains underneath it, coming and going. Unchanged. And it's that knowledge at the back of your mind of something there, that we often refer to as “peripheral awareness”. So, you are not trying to distract yourself from your patient endurance and the unpleasantness of sense restraint and watchful guarding of the sense doors. All you are trying to do is maintain the knowledge that there is an enduring act of breathing, happening at the same time right there.

If you see your breathing in and out in that neutral, peripheral way, it will slowly calm you down. It won't remove the endurance of sense restraint that you established. But it will take the edge off the pressure you were under. And if you cultivate it diligently enough it will remove the entire unpleasantness of it altogether.

See your breath as something happening underneath whatever else is going on. “Underneath” because it will feel so from the point of view of whatever you are occupied with. “Underneath” because, although at the same time, it is “before”, it is more primordial and

closer to the body.

The knowledge of breathing in and out doesn't require any special effort. Just a mental recognition. You don't need to go to it and make it your primary focus. Quite the opposite. If you keep it at the back of your mind without focusing on it, it will be done without any strain or force. That's why it will calm down your current strain of enduring.

That's how you practice *anāpānasati* in the right direction. It's a perpetual bodily activity that you choose to not completely forget. If you cultivate such recollection of the present breathing, regardless of what you are focused on at the same time, it will also eventually prevent hindrances from hindering you.

And that's the true *samatha*. Calming of the mind that you can do within your right endurance and sense restraint. And not using it to manage and get rid of the pain of your situation. Instead, just to calm down while the same situation remains.

There is an in-breath and an out-breath. An action that is bound with the experience of my body, inseparable from it. It is also a more fundamental action than any other action I choose to do. My breathing precedes walking, talking, standing up or sitting down. All of that requires breathing to be there. So by attending to the breathing correctly, you are calming down an activity that is inseparable from the body. You are calming down the *kāyasaṅkhāra*. By calming that down, all your other bodily actions will calm down too.

“Bhikkhus, this recollection of breathing, when developed and cultivated, is peaceful, sublime, an exquisite pleasant dwelling, and it disperses and relieves right on the spot evil unwholesome states whenever they arise. Just as, bhikkhus, in the last month of the hot season, when a mass of dust and dirt has swirled up, a great rain cloud out of season disperses it and settles it on the spot.”

—SN 54:9

I cannot emphasize enough the point that if you are doing *anāpānasati*

as a technique, a method, you are doing it at the expense of the enduring container. And that's a mistake. There is no right *samādhi* without the right sense restraint being there as its basis. So, don't use your meditation as an escape from the pressure of sense restraint. If you do, that means it will be rooted in your *aversion* towards the discomfort of sense restraint. Any act rooted in aversion towards discomfort, of any kind, is in its nature an act towards *sensuality* (i.e. avoiding discomfort for the sake of pleasure or less discomfort). That's why the Buddha said that when an ignorant mind is touched by an unpleasant feeling, it knows of no other escape than to seek pleasure. It knows of no other way to calm down its aversion to discomfort except to appease it by distracting it with pleasure. However, each time the mind turns to the senses for safety, the underlying tendency to being averse to pain increases. Each time the aversion to pain increases, the underlying tendency to turn to sense pleasures increases too. And so on. The vicious circle is maintained.

The entire point of "gradual training" is to begin breaking this circle by preventing you from unwittingly feeding it. Virtue, sense restraint, moderation in eating, watchfulness—all are there to gradually build up a container that will prevent you from giving in to the senses for comfort and safety. If you build it up properly it will also reveal to you that what you are averse to are the senses themselves. The six senses are not pleasant in themselves. They are like untamed animals. Not very nice to be around. That's why if you stop trying to blindly pacify those animals (so that they don't bother or attack you), you will see that the only right way to deal with them is to *tame them*.

Having a body is a chore. The six senses are a chore. The body is the natural and neutral resistance that you are paired with for as long as you live. An undeveloped mind, however, cannot bear this type of resistance and is thus averse to it in its very core. Hence, the automatic turn towards the senses and the relative safety and pleasure they provide. That's what the Buddha meant in saying that the underlying tendencies towards aversion, lust and delusion are present from the moment you are conceived:

“A young tender infant lying prone does not even have the notion ‘sensual pleasures,’ so how could sensual desire

arise in him? Yet the underlying tendency to sensual lust lies within him. A young tender infant lying prone does not even have the notion of ‘beings,’ so how could ill will towards beings arise in him? Yet the underlying tendency to ill will lies within him.”

–MN 64

Your patient endurance, virtue and meditation practice are about containing you from trying to spill out towards senses. Because unless you find a different type of safety and comfort, other than that of the senses, you will never be truly calm or free.

“Sensual pleasures give little gratification and much suffering and distress, and they are all the more full of drawbacks. Even though a noble disciple has clearly seen this with right wisdom, so long as they don’t achieve the joy and happiness that are apart from sensual pleasures and unskillful qualities, or something even more peaceful than that, they might still return to sensual pleasures. But when they do achieve that joy and happiness, or something more peaceful than that, they will not return to sensual pleasures.”

–MN 14

If such safety is found, through the right calming practice, then dependence on sensuality will diminish. By diminishing that dependence, feeding the tendency to aversion and ill will fades too. That’s why ill will and sensuality go hand in hand. You are already averse to your sense bases. By not enduring that aversion and instead choosing to act out and seek pleasurable safety of the senses, each time you do so you are taking your aversion with you. So next time you will even be averse not because you didn’t get the pleasure you wanted, but simply because you didn’t get as much of it.

We can go as far as to say that people have ill will towards other beings only because, fundamentally, they carry ill will towards their own senses. They are averse to the being that they themselves are. That’s the root of all ill will, and because of the aversion towards their senses they are dependent on sensuality through interaction with other people and the world. It’s the same root. Hence, if you

uproot it, you will be free from both ill will and sensuality at the same time. Just like an *anāgāmi* is.

Q: Uprooting it doesn't make the senses comfortable.

Nm: No, it doesn't. But it trains your mind to go beyond that basic discomfort and not experience *dukkha* on account of harbouring aversion towards it. Using the direction of the senses as an escape has never been addressed in one's life. From the moment a person is born their mind turns towards the world of the senses, as we elaborated above. This is also why people fear boredom and being with themselves without any distractions. It just brings back that which everyone has been trying to outrun their entire life: the discomfort of their own selves.

Thus, *samatha* is about calming that discomfort once you have *sufficiently endured it* beforehand. When calming is brought to fulfilment, then the four foundations of mindfulness have been thoroughly developed. Then all one is left with is freedom and a basic discomfort or "disturbance" that is this body. The six wild animals have all been completely tamed. It's just their calm presence now which still needs to be subtly endured until the aggregates break apart:

'He understands: 'Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more coming to any state of being.'

He understands thus: 'Whatever disturbances there might be dependent on the taint of sensual desire, those are not present here; whatever disturbances there might be dependent on the taint of being, those are not present here; whatever disturbances there might be dependent on the taint of ignorance, those are not present here. There is present only this amount of disturbance, namely, that connected with the six bases that are dependent on this body and conditioned by life.'

He understands: 'This field of perception is void of the taint of sensual desire; this field of perception is void of the taint of being; this field of perception is void of the

taint of ignorance. There is present only this non-voidness, namely, that connected with the six bases that are dependent on this body and conditioned by life.”

—MN 121

GATEWAY TO *NIBBĀNA*

We spoke a lot about the *enduring* of unpleasant or pleasant feelings. So how would you, practically, do that? If something bothers you and you fail to endure it, how do you know that you failed to endure it? What qualifies as failure in enduring it?

It is when you act out of that thing that bothers you. Acting out of anger or lust, means you failed to endure it. Even if your action is “small” and not a coarse breach of restraint, it is still rooted in a failure to endure the arisen feeling.

Now, what can you do in order to endure that pressure?

First, don’t act out of it. People might think, “I must be mindful of the pressure first”. But that’s not so. First you need to restrain your need towards acting out, by body, speech or mind. Mindfulness will arise on its own as a result of it. If you refrain from acting out of that pressuring feeling (towards lust, anger or distraction), you will be mindful. If you think “I must be mindful of this” you will be *doing* that mindfulness, i.e. that will be “acting out”.

That’s why virtue and the precepts come first. By not acting out of discomfort which resulted from an insult, for example, you know that you are enduring it. You are refraining from acting out physically. Now you must also not act out verbally, too. After you become skilled at that, you can endure that pressure mentally without compulsively feeding unwholesome thoughts of cruelty and harm. This means that at any point throughout this proper way of enduring, you are actually very mindful. By preventing yourself from acting out of craving. By prioritising the ‘not acting out’ you are automat-

ically cultivating mindfulness.

It's your mind that is *choosing* to act out of lust that overwhelms you with lust. It's not by having the lust arise on its own. It's the *mind choosing* to engage with ill will that results in anger overwhelming you. The ill will arises on its own, and in itself is not the problem. This mental 'choosing' to engage with the states that pressure you is the gateway through which these unwholesome things enter. You invite them in, you open the door for them, by 'acting out'.

For example, if someone comes to your doorstep and tries to pressure you to let them in, you are the one who chooses to let them in or keep the door closed. Sometimes many people might be at the door, trying to get you to open it. However, the door can only be opened from inside. So it is only when you cannot bear that mental pressure of knowing there are people outside that you willingly open the door. You might do so because you think you can successfully chase them away, but that was never the point. The point was for them to get you to open that door, and you did. It doesn't matter what you do after that, even if you make them go away. You couldn't bear the mental pressure they put on you and you acted out. They don't care if you open the door to let them in or chase them away, they just want you to open the door because when it's open they will find a way in. So, often people think: "I must get rid of this thing that pressures me". And then they "open the door" and engage with the lust or ill will. Thus, they become fully involved with it, even if they don't want to do so.

Not opening that door is the endurance that I am speaking about. If there is unpleasant pressure, don't try to get rid of it. If there is pressure towards pleasure, don't welcome it. Just remain unengaged with it, keep the door closed and guard the gateway. You don't need to be policing what is arising for you or what is pressuring you, or what hindrance is currently present. You don't need to know why they are at the door. You are safe inside, as long as you don't choose to open the door. That's how you will be guarding the right gateway, and thus no problems will arise.

And the problem is not that there is something upsetting you. Or

that there is something that is making your mind lustful. No, the problem is that when that experience manifests for you, you have no idea where the gateway for it is. You have no idea where the door is and that it should be kept closed. So before you know it, you are already outside. Trying to chase the upsetting experience away. Or trying to usher the pleasing experience in.

The gateway which I am describing is the *Middle Way*, and you need to see it sufficiently before it can become one of the options for you. At the moment, you are always outside, welcoming things or trying to make them disappear.

So, how do you develop the Middle Way then? How do you cultivate that choice?

By abstaining from opening the door and welcoming pleasure, and by abstaining from opening the door and trying to get rid of pain: you are thus abiding in the Middle Way. Even if you are unaware of it.

By choosing to not act out, you are choosing the Middle Way. If you do this enough, that choice will become clear and visible to you. That is why if you guard your mind correctly, you will rise above the five hindrances or anything that bothers you. You will realise that none of those arisen things are problems in themselves. The problem was in you being affected by or involved with them when you chose to open the gateway.

Thus, by enduring the five hindrances correctly, your mind will rise above them. It's not about preventing them from arising, because as it was said above—the hindrances don't hinder you in themselves. They become "hindrances" for you because of your choice to engage with them.

So, how then do you practically not act out of these hindrances or these unpleasant things? What do you do right now that you see the door and are keeping it closed?

You don't lose sight of that gateway. Don't become careless and

distract yourself from it. Clarify your responsibility for guarding the gateway and you will not need to worry about what specific lust or annoyance will be outside the door.

Thus the entire Dhamma can be boiled down to the simple instruction from the Buddha that whatever you know is wholesome, cultivate it, and whatever you know is unwholesome, do not cultivate it.

“The non-doing of all evil, the cultivation of wholesome qualities, and the cleansing of one’s mind. This is the teaching of the Buddha. Patient endurance is the foremost austerity. *Nibbāna* is supreme.”

—Dhp. 14, verse 183-184

Do it or not, it’s your choice, but if you cultivate the right choices sufficiently you will come to understand and uproot the nature of lust, aversion and delusion. You will fully discern the gateway and be unable to ever lose sight of it. It’s only then that you can reach the true peace.

PĀLI GLOSSARY

anāpānasati—mindfulness of breathing
akusala—unwholesome
anāgāmi—non-returner
avijjā—ignorance
bhava—existence, being
bhāvanā—development
dosa—aversion
dukkha—displeasure, suffering, pain
jhāna—meditation
kamma—action
kalyāṇamitta—spiritual friend
kusala—wholesome
lobha—greed
marāṇasati—mindfulness of death
moha—delusion, distraction
nibbāna—extinction
Pātimokkha—Monks' Discipline
puthujjana—commoner, worldling
samatha—calm
samādhi—composure
sammādiṭṭhi—right view
samsāra—wandering on
satipaṭṭhāna—foundations of mindfulness
sotāpanna—stream-enterer
silā—virtue, precepts
taṇhā—craving
vipāka—result (of action)
vipassanā—contemplation

ABBREVIATIONS

DN—*Dīgha Nikāya*
MN—*Majjhima Nikāya*
SN—*Saṃyutta Nikāya*
AN—*Aṅguttara Nikāya*
Thag.—*Theragāthā*



Ajahn Nyanamoli Thero was born in Serbia (Yugoslavia) in 1983.

His interest in Buddhist meditation was inspired by the books of another Yugoslavian monk, Bhikkhu Ñanajivako, who lived at the Polgasduwa Island Hermitage in Sri Lanka back in the 60s.

In 2005 Ajahn Nyanamoli Thero joined a Theravada Buddhist monastery in the Thai Forest Tradition of Ajahn Chah, where in 2007 he received his full Upasampada under Venerable Ajahn Sumedho Thera.

After living in various monasteries in Europe and Thailand for a number of years, Ajahn Nyanamoli Thero moved to Sri Lanka in 2013 where he has been living ever since, in a small private aranya he established for bhāvanā, called Hillside Hermitage, in central Sri Lanka.

For more of his teachings please see:
www.hillsidehermitage.org

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